

JASON HAMILTON



# OUT OF SHADOW

ROOTS OF CREATION BOOK 1

AN EPIC YA FANTASY ADVENTURE

# Out of Shadow

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Roots of Creation Book 1

# Jason Hamilton

Story Hobby Media

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*To my dad, who gave me a love of storytelling long before I could read and  
has been a loving supporter of my work since day one.*



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### **Heroes are never born...**

Before Jak became a hero, a horrible secret surrounded her birth. Witness the beginning of that secret as we follow her father while he searches for his wife, and finds more than he could possibly imagine.

Now he's faced with a choice. Follow orders, or turn against his comrades. What will he do when his wife's safety is on the line?

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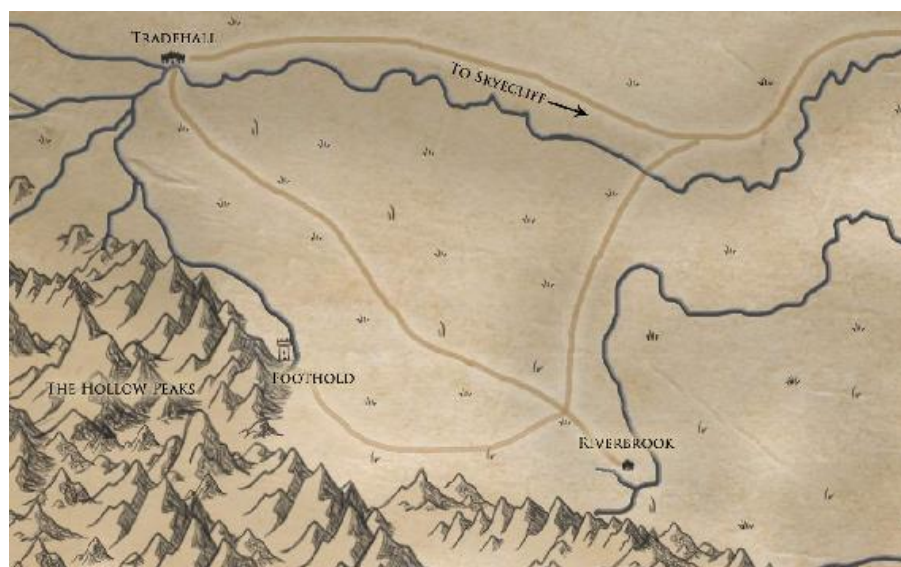
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Jak couldn't move.

Her breathing increased, and she tried to bring her arms to her sides, to push herself out of bed. Her arms stayed where they were.

What was going on? Why couldn't she move or see anything? Was she dead? She tried to thrash about, to move anything, even a finger, but nothing worked. She could still feel herself in her bed, presumably still in her father's small hut on the outskirts of Riverbrook. Of course she was, how could she have been moved in the night, that made no sense. Besides, she thought she could still hear the bleating of their sheep outside. She struggled to move once more, with no result.

A low rumble shook the room around her, and she stopped all efforts to move. Someone was there, inside the room. She could feel it. She could sense it.

She tried to speak, to call for her father, for anyone, but she couldn't. Try as she might, she couldn't even get her lips to part. She must be dead, that was the only explanation. But no, she was still breathing, but her chest moving up and down was the only movement she felt. Well, that and the beating of her heart, which felt like it was shaking her body by now.

The rumble came again. It shook the bed she slept in and rattled her bones. Was it an earthquake? Surely her father would feel that and come for her. But no, it didn't feel exactly like an earthquake. She'd felt those before, this close to the mountains. This rumble rose and fell. Wait! Jak's mind began to catch up with her. Those were words hidden in the low vibrations. Deep and powerful, but there.

"IS IT YOU?" was all she could make out.

"Me, what?" Only after the words came out of her mouth did she realize that she could speak again. She almost laughed out loud with joy. But before she could call for her father, the vice-like darkness pressed into her again.

"YOU ARE A CHILD OF SHADOW. ARE YOU THE ONE?"

"I'm just Jak." She was suddenly curious, despite the terrifying force that accompanied the voice. "I'm no one."

The voice growled. Not quite like an animal, but not quite human either. Then with a suddenness that took Jak by surprise, the dark force left her. Her eyes immediately began to make out details in the room, though the light from outside was not strong. Even better, she felt her arms and legs move at her command.

Instantly she was up and out of her bed, sprinting for the door to tell her father...

But what exactly should she tell him? That there was an intruder in the home? And that that intruder had kept her from moving or seeing anything? Even now, thinking about it, and looking around her, it seemed silly. She must have just had a nightmare or something, and mistook it for real life. There was no one here.

She walked to the front door and confirmed the lock was still engaged. She didn't need to bother her father with this.

The dream had probably come from all the stress she was feeling for the upcoming Branding. Yeah that had to be it. A Gifter was in town to give all eligible young people their brand, the magic power they would carry for the rest of their lives. No Gifter had entered Riverbrook in years, and Jak was finally old enough. She loved brands! She spared a glance for the journal that lay beside her bed. It held everything she had ever learned on all the brands. She knew each line by heart.

Nevertheless, the Branding was not only the most exciting, but simultaneously the most stressful thing to happen to Jak in her life. Just thinking about it made Jak hurry to get her breath of fresh air.

Slipping her boots on, she tiptoed outside. Even at sixteen, her father didn't approve of her leaving the house before he awoke. He was ridiculously worried about her like that. He didn't even let her go into town on her own yet. She was old enough, and all of her friends were allowed to go into town. In a small village of less than a hundred people, where everyone knew everyone, what possible danger could she get into? So she did her best not to make any noise. Regardless, she needed some fresh air, and to wash her sweating face.

Light had appeared in the east, though still faint. She grabbed a bucket and used the faint light to guide her to the nearby brook that gave the local township its name, and also provided water for farmers and livestock, including her father's herd of sheep.

Upon reaching the brook, she bent down to pick up a handful of water, sipped gently, then used the rest to wash her face. The brook was cold to the touch, coming from the snow-covered peaks to the south. It was nearly spring, and the brook was finally starting to fill with water.

Jak pulled up her heavy, dark hair into a bun, careful not to cover the deep red streak that ran from her right temple to the tips of her

hair. No one had hair like her and it was at least something that made her a little special in this tiny town. Though it was just about the only thing that made her special. She avoided twisting her finger in the streak, like she was prone to do when she was nervous. Her father said she got it from her mother, though he wouldn't say more on that subject. Jak had never met her mother. Apparently she had gone off into the mountains shortly after Jak was born and never came back.

She set about dipping her bucket into the brook. The sun was just beginning to light the sky and she could faintly make out her surroundings. But...something was strange. The brook lay in front of her, but beyond it, closer to the mountains, she thought she saw a dark figure stalking the way near the foothills. She squinted, dread filling her stomach once again. Was there someone out there? Had her nightmare been real after all?

What if her experience had been caused by one of those demons she kept hearing about? She had heard that rogue Gifters sometimes created small armies of demons, though she had trouble believing it. Who would intentionally mutate a human like that?

Her father, who had an unusual knowledge of outsider things, always said there was some truth to rumors. So she peered intently at the far-off shape. But she blinked, and it was gone. Hesitant, Jak could feel a chill settling back into her spine. But no, it was probably a trick of the morning light anyway. She still couldn't see much. Besides, demons would have...eaten her or something, if that had been the problem. She didn't have a scratch on her, so it couldn't have been demons. It must have been a nightmare. Best to just get on with her chores. Feeling slightly comforted, but still uneasy, she collected her bucket and turned back to the house.

Returning from the brook, she paused. Something bothered her and she still couldn't figure out what. Wait a minute, she couldn't hear the sound of any animals. The sheep were always making some kind of noise, and Grette, their sheep dog, was usually awake as well. Just now, there was nothing, no evidence of life, not even the morning songbirds.

Curious, she diverted her course to the sheep pen. Perhaps they were all still asleep for some reason. Maybe she had just been too far away to hear anything. As she approached, though, nothing stirred. Upon arriving, she finally saw why. The bucket of water fell to the ground, forgotten as her hands cupped her mouth in shock.

All of the sheep were dead.

Not only were they dead, but they had been slaughtered. Entrails lay all over, and blood coated their fleeces. So much blood! More than a sheep could hold! It mixed with the mud, pooling and dripping down the slight incline towards the gate. Towards her!

A wild beast, no, several wild beasts must have come here in the night. They had left nothing alive.

Breathing hard, she slipped in the mud as she turned to run as fast as she could to the house, the pale of water still lying on the ground.

"Father!" she shouted as she approached the house. "Father, the sheep!"

She raced through the door and already her father was awake and out of his room with a knife in hand. That knife was never too far away from him. He carried it everywhere and always left it on his bed-side table at night. He held it now, unsheathed.

"What is it?" he asked, urgently. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she panted, having forgotten her nightmare. "It's the sheep, they're..." but at that moment, something jumped from her stomach to her throat, and she rushed back outside to vomit. Not much came out, she hadn't eaten anything yet. But that didn't stop her from heaving and coughing.

Her father put on his boots in an instant and stepped outside.

"Stay close to me," he said as she wiped bits of bile from her lips.

"I don't know if I want to go back there..."

"Stay. Close," he said again, slowly with emphasis. It was not a suggestion.

Jak said no more. She wanted to protest his overprotective nature. She always wanted to protest that. But perhaps this time he was right. Something was out there, something that had slaughtered all their livestock. The last place she wanted to be was away from her father's side.

They approached the pen, and Jak heard her father take several deep breaths.

"What was it, wolves?" Jak asked. It was the first explanation that came to her mind. Wolves had never been a huge problem near Riverbrook, but they were known to take a sheep or two, when they could catch one alone. But a slaughter of this magnitude...

"No wolves could do this." Her father growled. "This was something worse. Did you see anything else?"

Jak shook her head. "Nothing. I went to the brook to collect water and when I got back I..."

"What is it?" her father asked, looking down at her.

"There was something," she said finally, looking back at the house. "I woke up this morning and couldn't see or move. I thought it was just a nightmare, but then out towards the mountains, I thought I saw a dark shape. It wasn't an animal though, it walked on two feet. But I couldn't see much more than that."

"This nightmare of yours, did anything speak to you?"

Jak met his eyes, surprised that he had guessed. But then again, he

knew a lot more than she. “Yes,” she replied, looking at her feet. “I almost couldn’t make it out, but I think I heard the words ‘is it you?’ from...something. It didn’t talk like a person.”

Rael swore under his breath. “Come!” he said, almost harshly. He never raised his voice at her, even when he was angry. Jak did as commanded, not daring to question him when he was in this kind of mood.

Once they were back in the house, her father told her to get ready to leave. They were going into town. That was fine, they had planned to go there today anyway, for the Branding. Despite everything that had happened in these short morning hours, hopefully they were still going. It was the only day that the Gifter would be here for the next two or three years. She didn’t want to wait any longer.

Thankfully Britta and Sandy, their two horses, were still alive. Whatever had killed the sheep had stayed away from the stables. From the way they stamped their feet and shifted from side to side, Jak could tell that they had been spooked though. They understood that something horrible had just happened.

After calming them down, Jak helped bridle and attach the horses to their wagon. As she brought them around the house, she saw her father carrying several barrels of grain in the air with his brand of Telekinesis. She marveled as she watched his magic at work, the brand on his left hand glowing with the effort. He placed them on the wagon and went back inside to get more, calling on Jak to help as well. Pulling herself out of her thoughts, she did as instructed.

“Are we taking all of the food?” she asked her father. Her mind was starting to race. What did this mean? Were they leaving the house for good?

“I don’t know exactly what we’ll do next,” her father replied. “But we’ll be staying in the town tonight. Perhaps Naman and his wife will let us sleep on their floor.”

Staying? In Riverbrook! She’d love to stay with Namen, even if she had to sleep on the floor. She could stay up all night talking to Marek, Namen’s son. Marek was her best friend in all the world, and had been since they were young. For years they had talked about what brands they were going to get, and now they would finally have some of their own. She wagered they would never stop talking tonight.

She hid her excitement, only nodding her head and continuing to fill the wagon. Once they had loaded most of the grain and dried mutton, some clothes, and a few blankets, they were ready to set off. The only other item Jak made sure to grab was her journal. She took a moment to glance at it while she waited for her father to bring the last of their supplies. It was full of illustrations that Jak had penned herself, pictures of the various brands, with notes scribbled below and

around each one. It was an orderly mess, but one that Jak adored. And today would be the day that she would receive her very own. Or at least, she hoped. She wasn't certain what the Gifter would say when she made her request.

Jak hoisted herself into the driver seat. Her father usually let her drive the horses these days, one of the few liberties he allowed her. Though he still never let her go alone.

Rael's hands were full as he ducked through the entrance of the house to join Jak in the yard. His bow and quiver were strapped to his back, his arms held a long item wrapped in leather. Jak swallowed. She hadn't seen the long spear since she'd snuck into his room a few years ago and unwrapped it from its leather cover. It was taller than a man with a sharp stone point lashed to the tip of the wooden shaft, stained old with time and Jak didn't want to think what else. Jak had asked her Father about it once, but his calm, quiet face had grown stiff, his eyes hard and angry. "It was from another life, Jak. Don't ask me about it again."

Jak didn't dare ask him why he was taking it out now. Perhaps he had some idea of what had attacked the sheep in the first place. Whatever it was, it had him on edge, and that frightened Jak more than the dead sheep.

Her father hoisted the spear into the wagon where it landed on the foodstuffs with a heavy thud. He then hopped on himself, keeping the bow and quiver on his person. He said nothing, but nodded at Jak to begin driving. After a sharp crack of the reins, they were off.

Neither said much as they approached the village. It was several miles away, following the river. Rael never was one for talking, and Jak was too busy thinking about the morning, but also about the Branding. Despite her father's obvious bad temper, she eventually had to ask.

"Uh, father." She swallowed trying to find the right words. "We're still going to attend the Branding today, right?"

Her father closed his eyes and...was that a smile? "I haven't forgotten. Yes, of course, we'll be there. I need to talk to Parrem anyway."

Parrem, or the "Lord Mayor" as everyone else called him, was the man in charge of Riverbrook. Which mostly meant he sat around all day and occasionally organized and hosted the Branding. He also conducted the village's religious ceremonies, primarily reading to them from the Annals of Adam on High Morning.

Relief flooded her. At least her father was being reasonable on this matter. Despite everything that had happened, the last thing she wanted to miss was that rare event. She had been too young the last time a Gifter had visited their small town.

She had never told her father which brand she wanted to get, and her father never pushed her for information. Branding was a personal decision, he always said, and it should be made without outside influence like parental or societal expectations. That level of freedom was unusual coming from him. Most would probably assume she'd take the same brand as her father, but he had never made that assumption for her.

Despite her father's assurances, Jak knew that he secretly wanted her to join him as a Telekenetic. Many children did this, choosing the brand of their parents as a way to make apprenticeship easier. But as exciting as her friends found it to be, Jak never wanted Telekinesis. She knew what she wanted, and she also knew that her father would not like it.

By the time they reached the town of Riverbrook, the sun was already high in the sky. The town was small, or at least that's what people said. Jak had never seen anything bigger, so she couldn't really say for herself. But to her, it was the best place in the world. Coming to Riverbrook meant spending time with her friends, gazing at the larger homes, and maybe getting a piece of candy from Marek's parents at their shop.

Most of the buildings ran along one street, though some of the bigger structures, like the Lord Mayor's house, sat off on the east side on a small hill overlooking the town.

"Jak, you're here! Jak!" A voice cried out.

It was Marek, Jak's best friend. She looked at her father, who nodded, and Jak hopped off the wagon, taking only her journal with her.

"Hey Marek!" Jak called out, "Are you excited?"

"Am I excited?" the boy stared at her, "Of course I am! What are you planning to get?"

"I...I'm still not sure," she lied.

"What?" another voice called out. This time it was Paul, another of Jak's friends, who trotted over to meet them. Jak had known the boys since they were small children, but she couldn't help noticing how square their shoulders were starting to look. "You know brands better than anyone in the village, probably better than anyone from here to Tradehall."

Jak hid her blush. "I just like learning all I can before making a decision."

"Well I know exactly what brand I'm getting."

"Oh yes," said Marek. "*Everyone* knows what you're getting."

"What? Enhanced strength is obviously the best option. Who doesn't want to be strong? Maybe I could join the Watchers!"

Jak snickered, trying to picture Paul in a uniform. "They would

never let someone like you in.”

“I could do it!” His face scrunched up, indignantly. “Though I suppose Blood-burning would be pretty cool too.”

Marek looked sidelong at Paul, and Jak’s face flushed. “Paul!” she cried, “Don’t even joke about that!”

Blood-burning was a very dangerous type of brand, one that allowed the user to boil the blood inside a person. It was outlawed for most people, but rumors persisted that the queen at Skyecliff had a secret band of Blood-burners as her most deadly assassins.

Jak turned back to Marek, “So what brand do you want?” she asked.

“Telekinesis,” he replied, “I thought maybe your dad could teach me?”

“I’m sure he’d love that.” Jak said. Her excitement rose. She would love that too, though she’d never say as much to Marek. Maybe this meant she would see her friend more often. But just as soon as she thought it, she realized that was impossible, and her spirits slumped. Not with the brand Jak was about to choose.

“Say, why is your wagon so full?” Marek asked Jak. “And why does your father have his bow. Are you guys going somewhere?”

Jak felt her spirits fall even further as she remembered the morning events. “No, I’m afraid we had some trouble this morning.” And she proceeded to tell them everything that had happened, about the sheep, the smell, and the gore, and the creature she thought she saw though she left out the part about her nightmare. She needed to know more before she told anyone else.

Marek and Paul gaped at her with an odd mixture of revulsion and admiration. Boys were so weird.

“You mean, all of them were dead?” asked Paul, disbelief on his face.

“She’s probably lying,” a voice came from behind Jak. She turned and closed her eyes in exasperation. It was Estel, a girl just a year or two older than Jak, and her least favorite person in the world.

“It’s true, Estel.” She spun on the girl, her fists clenched. Estel always seemed to have it in for her. “Why would I make up something like that?”

“How should I know, you’ve always craved attention. Oh!” she placed a wilted hand against her chest in mock distress. “Look at me! I can recite all the brands, my hair is so different, my father never lets me have fun.”

Jak felt her face grow hot. Who did Estel think she was? Well, she would give her a piece of her mind if it—

“Cut it out Estel, she never did anything to you.” Marek glared at the girl, the same disgust on his face that Jak felt.



Marek was the only one who frequently stood up to Estel, and the girl seemed to like that. Even now, Jak could see the hungry look in Estel's eyes as Marek told her off. Jak's eyebrows furrowed. If Estel knew what was good for her, she would stay away from Marek. If not, Jak would...well, she wasn't exactly sure what she would do.

"We'll see how you feel after the Branding," Estel hummed at Marek. "I'm going to be a Firedancer. If you're lucky, maybe I'll dance for you."

"Ahem, so...I wonder where the Gifter is," said Paul, trying to cut the tension.

"He's with the Lord Mayor," Marek answered, his eyes still on Estel. "He arrived last night." Marek's parents were shop owners, and got to see almost all of the visitors into town.

"We should probably head over there," Jak said, "All the new blood and trade masters are supposed to meet at the Lord Mayor's home by midday." She looked up at the sun. It must be close to midday already.

"Yeah, let's go!" said Paul, "I gotta see if I can find Vern."

Naturally. Vern was a trade master for Strength, even though he only received the brand himself a little over five years ago. He also ran the only tavern in town. Assuming that Paul really did receive a Strength brand, Vern would likely be his trade master.

They walked through the village, down main street and up a small side street that led up to the Lord Mayor's home. The building towered over all the rest. It was the only building within miles to have a third story. What would anyone do with all that space? Though she had to admit, it was still the most exciting building in town.

Catching herself staring, she forced her eyes back down to her level and joined several other boys and girls her age at the door, which hung open to let everyone in. She recognized all of them, though many, like Estel, were a little older than she. Because Jak had only recently turned sixteen, she only barely made the cut.

Naomi, one of Jak's older friends, waited inside to greet them as they came in. Naomi currently had a job as the mayor's assistant.

"Come in," she said. "The Lord Mayor has been expecting you."

They each shuffled in, admiring the large house from within. There was enough room to fit Jak's entire wagon and stable in here! Who needed so much space? Jak had never been in the Lord Mayor's house before. The man himself was portly and, some say, came all the way from Skyecliff. Apparently he had run into some financial trouble there, or at least as much financial trouble as a nobleman could have. He moved to the small town of Riverbrook and soon became its mayor. Most of the villagers didn't mind this, as long as the old man left them alone, which he did for the most part. His main role was to

represent Riverbrook when passing nobles or Gifters arrived.

Naomi led them to a large room in the back of the mayor's home, where benches stood in neat little rows. Many of the adults were already there, including Rael, Jak's father. He was standing silently in the corner with his arms crossed, observing the room. He was always like that: watchful, sober, never relaxed. The other adults were all trade masters, specialists in one particular brand or another. They greeted the young hopefuls by bringing their brand hand to their chest, nodding and smiling. Jak eagerly sought out the brand on each hand she saw, running through all the different options in her mind.

A door at the other end of the hall opened, and the Lord Mayor stepped in. He was accompanied by a man who was unmistakably the Gifter. The stranger had on a long coat that hung down to his knees. The coat was dirty and worn, as was the man's face, hair, and beard. His brown eyes twinkled as he saw Jak and the other young women and men. He ran a hand through his beard, which was starting to gray.

The Lord Mayor spoke first. "My friends! Welcome to this very special occasion. You are here because it's finally time for you to come of age and join the rest of us in our glorious union as..."

Jak kept her eyes fixed on the Gifter, who was taking a moment to meet the eyes of each young person in attendance while the mayor rattled on and on. When he met Jak's eyes, she thought she saw something there, a deepness. His eyes lingered on her, perhaps more than the others? Jak swallowed. Did he know anything? Could a Gifter somehow tell what brand a prospect wanted? She glanced at her left hand, imagining the brand there. She was brought out of her thoughts as the mayor abruptly finished his little speech and gestured to the Gifter, turning the time over to him.

"Welcome," the newcomer said, "My name is Gabriel. As you might have guessed, I am the Gifter." A few polite chuckles scattered through the room. "I travel a lot these days but my home is in Skyecliff, at the college of Skyecliff specifically where I teach when I'm not abroad."

Wow, a real teacher from Skyecliff. What it would be like to see a city that big.

"Before we get started, I want to impress upon all of you the importance of today's event. What you will receive today is sacred. They are not gifts from me; I am merely the intermediary, the middle man. These are gifts from the Holy Relics, passed on from our ancestors long before any of you were born."

Jak felt excitement course through her. She loved any mention of the Holy Relics, the sources of all magic. Branded artifacts that had first provided templates for the brands. Everything they knew came

from one Relic or another, and one day, she hoped to see one with her own eyes.

“Those gathered around you will be your tutors. Depending on what brand you choose, one of them will instruct you in its use. I believe, we have quite a variety for such a small town as this. Even a Telekinetic.” He nodded towards Rael, who returned the nod. “As always, we advise you to choose a brand that will benefit you in your chosen profession. For this reason, many of you will choose the same brand as your parents or another family member. We encourage this, as they will know best how to guide you. But, of course, the choice is yours.”

Jak clutched her journal, and felt her nervousness rise. What if the Gifter said no? What if she couldn't get the brand that she wanted? What if...? Every possible scenario played out in her mind as the Gifter began to list the approved series of brands. She already knew all of that, and she only partially paid attention. This was obviously a routine that the Gifter had recited many times before, for his voice had grown monotone. So Jak was almost surprised when he turned to the first child on the row in front of him.

“What's your name, child.”

“Ella,” the girl said timidly.

“Well Ella, do you know which brand you want?”

“Yes,” she said, and offered a pouch full of coin. “Hungerless.”

Of course. Ella was from one of the poorest families in the village. They must have spent years saving coin for the brand, knowing that a brand like Hungerless would save them money in the long run. Many families chose this brand. Ella would still need to eat, but in far-less quantities than before. It was a passive brand, one of the few that didn't require an apprenticeship.

“Ah, very well. Are you sure? The brand stays with you for life. You will never have another. You can never change it.” Ella hesitated, but nodded. Gabriel accepted the pouch, and placed one hand on Ella's left wrist. Ella gasped as a sound like burning flesh filled the air. Light shone from the Gifter's own brand as his magic did its work. When the light subsided, a patchwork of black lines had formed on the back of Ella's left hand, the traditional location for a brand. She raised her hand to look at it, excitement evident on her face.

“Th..Thank you,” she muttered. The Gifter smiled and moved on to the next in line. He continued this process, asking the young person what brand they wanted, occasionally asking a mentor if they would accept an apprentice, taking the money, then giving the requested brand. He was coming closer and closer. Soon, it would be Jak's turn. Nervously, she clutched her journal closer to her chest.

Marek was sitting next to Jak and the Gifter approached him first.

“And what is it that you want?” he said.

“Telekinesis,” he said without hesitation, holding his pouch of coin high.

A mutter ran through the room. No one had asked for that brand yet. Rael was the only mentor in the whole town, and he lived far enough away to make regular journeys a staunch commitment.

“Well it’s been awhile since I performed that one.” Gabriel said, in good spirits. “I wonder, does Master Rael agree to take on an apprentice.”

Jak looked over at her father. He still stood in his corner. Would he accept after what had happened this morning? With all the sheep gone, Jak didn’t know how they were going to make a living for the near future. With that uncertainty, could Rael really commit to an apprenticeship? But after a moment’s hesitation, Rael nodded, “I will accept.”

“Very good, well then.” Gabriel offered a hand and took Marek’s outstretched arm. He was visibly shaking with anticipation. His face quickly turned from excitement to pain as the brand settled into him. Soon, however, it was over, and a criss-cross of black lines extended from the back of his hand. It was one of the more complex brands.

Now, it was Jak’s turn. She swallowed. She had imagined this moment for a long time, but now felt like she almost couldn’t work up the courage to ask for the brand she had chosen.

“And what would you like, my dear? Telekinesis like your friend or your father?” Jak blinked. How did he know that she was Rael’s daughter?

“I...um...” she had trouble speaking the words. Gabriel stood patiently. “I...I want to be a Gifter like you.”

Silence filled the room.

“W ell now,” Gabriel rubbed his chin, “You know, there

are no Gifters in your village. No one to guide you.”

Jak looked at her feet. “I know.”

“It would mean leaving Riverbrook and accompanying me to Skyecliff.”

“I know,” she repeated. Jak didn’t dare meet her father’s eyes in that moment, but she knew what she would find there: concern, disbelief, and most of all, hurt.

The Gifter spoke again, “I’m going to come back to you, after I’ve finished the rest of my business here.” He gestured at the other young men and women in the room.

He moved on to the next candidate. Jak sat with her head facing the floor. She felt the eyes of everyone in the room still on her. Worse, she could hear Estel snickering several seats away. No one from their village had ever asked to be a Gifter. There were only a handful in the entire kingdom. Marek nudged Jak and whispered, “What are you thinking? You can’t be a Gifter.”

“Why not?” Jak still stared at the floor.

“Well because...because you can’t leave Riverbrook.” Marek said, as if it were that simple.

Jak was touched by his concern, but on the other hand, she had planned this for a long time. With her father’s overprotective attitude, she needed to get away from it all. She wasn’t thrilled with leaving Riverbrook. She had no desire to see Skyecliff or Tradehall or any place in particular. She loved her home. But she did want one thing, and that was to learn all she could about brands. Yet, in that moment, with all eyes on her, feeling the crushing guilt of springing this on her father, all she wanted to do was disappear into the floor.

The Gifter continued giving out the requested brands. Paul got his enhanced strength, Estel got her Firedancing, and others received their impressive brands, all of them quite appropriate to their users for one reason or another. Jak just sat there, with no brand on her hand, wondering if Gabriel would even agree to give it to her. What did it

mean that he would come back to her? Was he just waiting for a private moment to turn her down? To tell her that she needed to stay home? She had been dreaming of this day for years, and now she wished it was over. She still didn't look at her father, but she could feel his eyes on her. What was he thinking?

Finally, the Gifter finished giving out all of the brands. "Thank you all for coming!" he said cheerily, patting his pouch where the coin jingled. "You may return home." Jak almost wondered if he meant she should go home as well, before he walked past her and said, in a low tone, "You, come with me."

She did as asked, following him into a small side room, probably meant for the servants when they weren't tending to the Lord Mayor's household. Gabriel indicated a chair on one side of a wooden table. He sat on the other side.

"Well now," he said, his mood still upbeat. "It's been a long time since someone asked to be a Gifter. Not everyone trusts us, you see."

Jak frowned, "Why not?"

"Well, you can understand that we take special precautions. The Gift is not to be taken lightly. In the wrong hands, it can become a weapon of grave significance. It can kill or pervert life itself."

Jak nodded. So there was some truth to the rumors that Gifters could mutate other humans into becoming demons.

"So, that being said, I'm going to ask you a series of questions. And you must be honest in your answers. If you are not, I will know."

"Okay." Jak felt rising apprehension. She hadn't thought she could become more nervous, but her shaking hands betrayed her.

"What is your full name?"

Jak was almost taken aback by the simple question.

"Jaknilteksnewodheghoma." She spelled out her full name.

"And Raelteksnewodheghoma is your father?"

She nodded, and worked up the courage to ask her own question. "How do you know him?"

Gabriel smiled. "Your father and I have had dealings in the past, before he came to Riverbrook. He's a good man. Saved my life once."

Jak blinked. She'd never met anyone who knew her father outside of Riverbrook.

"Now then, why do you want to be a Gifter?"

This, Jak could answer, "I want to learn everything I can about brands. I want to hunt for Holy Relics and find new brands we've never tried."

"Those are some lofty goals. Many other Gifters have already tried and failed."

"I will not fail."

"You sound sure of yourself."

"I am."

He sat back in his chair. "Ambition is a trait we admire, but I warn you about letting it take you too far. I've known men and women who wasted away in pursuit of more knowledge."

Jak nodded and inwardly winced. He was already telling her off. She would never be a Gifter at this rate.

"What are Salizon's constants?" Gabriel continued.

Jak perked up, she knew this one. "Singularity: A person may only receive one brand. Consistency: All brands consist of the same black lines, and each one must be identical to work."

"Very good, and the third?"

"Permanence: Once you receive a brand, it stays with you for life."

"And what happens if you get the brand wrong, and it is permanently attached to someone?"

Jak swallowed, "They die."

"Or worse." Gabriel nodded. "Well you seem to know your stuff. I wonder—"

"Excuse me." Jak felt bolder now, "But I'm not sure I agree with Salizon's constants."

Gabriel raised an eyebrow, "You don't agree with something that has been proven time and time again?"

What was she doing? "Yes," she continued. "I find all three of them to be based on circumstantial evidence. Also, they don't fit the legends."

Gabriel said nothing, so she continued. "First of all, don't some of the ancient Relics have more than one brand? Also, has anyone tried removing their skin to get rid of the brand to prove its permanence? And how do we know that all brands have the same markings, if we haven't discovered all brands yet. Maybe there's some new kind of brand that uses completely different markings."

Gabriel considered her for a moment. "You have an inquisitive mind. But do you think that someone, somewhere hasn't already asked every one of those questions?"

"Well, yes, I suppose."

"No matter, it demonstrates that you've put a lot of thought into this. With a little training, perhaps you could be an asset to us."

"So you'll let me become a Gifter?" Jak didn't dare hope.

"Don't be hasty. I have a few more tests for you. Can you tell me what this brand is?"

He took out a piece of parchment with a symbol painted on it. It bore several straight lines that led down to several other vertical lines, stacked to look almost like an upside down house. Jak smiled. This one was easy.

"Strength," she said immediately. "The simplest of the brands.

Maybe you should try something a little harder.”

Gabriel chuckled, and pulled out another card. This one Jak also identified with ease. The Gifter continued showing her illustrations of various brands, while Jak recited them one by one from memory. She never missed one.

When they were all done, the Gifter asked several more questions before finally saying, “Well, I think that will do for now. Before we make any decision, however, I want to talk to your father.”

Jak’s heart sank. She knew her father wouldn’t want her to become a Gifter, to leave the farm. He wouldn’t even let her go into the town alone. Would he simply refuse to let her go? But she nodded anyway and left the room. Her father waited for her, still standing in his corner. Jak could see the concern etched in his hard face.

At a motion from Gabriel, Jak’s father walked into the side room. The door closed, and Jak sat alone for what felt like hours. At one point the Lord Mayor popped his head in, opened his mouth like he was about to say something, then left as suddenly as he had appeared.

Jak began pacing the room. She couldn’t sit any longer. Back and forth, back and forth, trying to hear anything from the other room. But all she heard were low tones, muffled by the wall. No one raised their voice, so at least her father wasn’t mad. Or at least, if he was mad, he was holding it in well.

After what felt like an eternity, the door opened again. Her father and Gabriel stepped out. She looked at each, trying to read their expressions, hope evident on her face.

Gabriel spoke, “Your father has agreed to let you come with me to Skyecliff.”

Jak’s eyes opened wide. It was happening! She was going to become a Gifter! Tears of relief came to her eyes and she did the only thing that made sense to her in that moment: she hugged her father. He said nothing, but held her tight.

When she broke the embrace, she looked over at Gabriel. He stood there with one arm outstretched. She looked at him inquisitively.

“Your arm.” He prodded.

“What, now?” Jak didn’t know what else to say. “I thought it took years to become a full Gifter.”

“Did you see me wait to give brands to the others? You will have teachers just like them. So yes, if this is a decision you want to make, you must make it now. There will be no turning back.” His arm remained outstretched.

Jak glanced up at her father, whose face remained still as a rock. Then she offered her left arm to the Gifter.

“Be warned!” The Gifter’s cheery tone was suddenly gone. He grabbed Jak’s wrist and held it tight. “As an apprentice, you must only



use the brand under careful supervision. Violation of this rule will result in severe punishment. Unauthorized use of magic on a living being, especially if it results in the death or mutilation of that being, will result in your own death. Do you understand?"

Jak nodded. She knew the rules. She didn't worry at this stage however. Most students couldn't learn how to use their brand until they had months of training. And she understood that the misuse of Gifter magic could have extreme consequences.

A severe pain shot through her arm. She gasped and looked down where the Gifter held her arm fast. The white lines of the Gifter's own brand glowed with a bright light. Black lines began extending and stretching out across the back of her hand. It was the same symbol the Gifter had on his own hand, five lines joined together at the base, similar in structure to a hand, with a circle surrounding one of the fingers. After a long moment, the pain subsided, and the Gifter released her arm. She stared at her hand, seeing the black symbol etched there. The symbol of a Gifter. Jak almost couldn't believe her eyes.

She let out her breath in a soft laugh. Then she looked up at her father and saw...nothing. What was he thinking? He was okay with this, right? He had to be if he was letting her go.

The Gifter spoke again, "I leave for Skyecliff tomorrow at dawn. I expect you to be ready."

Tomorrow? That was so soon! Jak looked at her father, wondering what he thought of losing her so quickly. But his face gave away nothing. Jak nodded to the Gifter, who then left the room.

Jak and Rael left the Lord Mayor's home. When they were outside, all of Jak's friends were waiting.

"What did he say? Did you get it?" Marek ran to her.

Jak said nothing, only held up her left hand for them to see the brand. All of her friends stood in awe. No one from their village had ever left to become a Gifter.

Marek stared at the brand, then at Jak's face, then back at the brand again. Quite suddenly, he turned and stalked off.

"Marek!" Jak called out. She needed her friend now more than ever. "Please don't go!"

Marek didn't respond, didn't turn around. He just kept walking until Jak couldn't see him anymore.

She turned to look at her father, the question in her eyes. But Rael only turned away, the same look on his face that Jak had seen in Marek's. Jak's lips formed a line. This wasn't fair. All she wanted to do was be a Gifter, and people were acting like she had betrayed them.

Paul and the others were still admiring her brand, but it was Paul who eventually asked the big question. "So when do you leave?"

“Tomorrow morning, apparently.” Jak responded, not looking at her father anymore. If he wasn’t going to be happy for her, then she wouldn’t let that bother her.

A few “oos” and “ahhs” came from the small crowd of young people. It didn’t do much to improve her mood. Her best friend had left her, and her father wasn’t happy either. She didn’t care what anyone else thought. Eventually, she shook off the crowd of onlookers and followed her father to where the wagon stood. They proceeded to untie the horses in silence, neither saying a word to each other. Jak could tell that her father was hurt that she would be leaving him, but right now that mattered little to her. It was her life after all. She didn’t like leaving her father either, but she was dealing with it. He could deal with it too.

Finally, the horses were ready, and Rael began to hoist himself into the seat. He spoke for the first time since leaving the Gifter.

“I’m going back to the farm to pick up the rest of our belongings. We’ll need everything we have for the trip.”

Jak stilled. “Wait, what are you talking about?”

“I’ll be going with you to Skyecliff. I might as well, seeing as the farm is basically ruined. I know a few people, I’ll be able to find...steady work there.” He said it almost like he detested the idea.

All the anger Jak had felt boiling just underneath the surface, suddenly came rushing out of her. “I don’t believe this. You just can’t let me go, can you?”

Rael’s eyes darkened. “Watch your tone.”

Normally Jak would have shut her mouth upon seeing her father grow cold like that, but she didn’t care. “No, you’ve always told me what to do, ever since I can remember. You never let me do what I want to do. You never gave me any freedom.”

“I have my reasons.”

“Yeah, well maybe you should reconsider those reasons. I can’t be holed up by you any more, I need to have a chance to make my own decisions.”

She thought she saw her father’s face soften a bit, but only a bit. After a long, tense pause, he finally spoke. “Perhaps you’re right, perhaps I have been too controlling. I will try to give you the freedom you need once we’re in Skyecliff, once you’re part of the college.”

Jak highly doubted that he’d keep his word on that, at least he wouldn’t give her the kind of freedom she was looking for. “I don’t think you will. You’ve said things like that before, but you always hold me back when all my friends are allowed to come into town, or go exploring, or a half-dozen other things!”

“I’m sorry Jak, but as I said, I have my reasons. And besides, I have nothing to keep me here, I will likely starve over the winter if I don’t

find work in a place like Skyecliff. I thought maybe Naman could help us out since I'd be training his son, but I don't think that will work anymore. Broken Brands," he cursed. "And now I have to go tell your friend that I will not be able to train him. With you starting a new adventure in Skyecliff, as a Gifter. You're going to need me."

"I don't want you!" Jak knew the moment the words were out of her mouth that they had been a mistake. Her father's face grew dark and...sad. "Father, I'm...I didn't mean..." Just then she was all too conscious of townsfolk watching in the street.

Her father began turning the horses in the direction of their farm, leaving her standing by the side of the road. "I'll be back early in the morning. The Gifter knows to wait for me. You can stay with Marek's family."

Jak didn't want to mention that Marek also seemed to hate her at the moment.

Suddenly, her father froze, looking away towards the edge of town.

Jak looked at him confused. What was he waiting for? "Father, what..."

"Shh..." he said, listening intently.

Jak listened too. And that's when she heard the first scream.

**T**he scream came from further down in the village, near the open

square where Jak had found Marek and Paul upon arriving. Everyone in the street turned to locate the source, and Jak squinted her eyes, trying to see something in that direction.

Rael, however, was already springing into action. Holding his hand out, his Telekinesis brand glowed and the leather-wrapped spear came flying to his grip. As the leather wrapping fell away, the spear glinted in the sunlight. Jak marveled at its perfect steel tip, still polished and clean. The body of the spear bore carved and painted red and golden circles, evenly spaced along its shaft. What it would be like to hold that spear in her own hands.

“Jak,” he yelled, pulling her out of her imagination, “I want you to get back inside Perram’s house. You and all the other young ones.” As he spoke, he set the spear alongside the wagon, swung his bow off his back, and nocked an arrow.

Jak bristled. She hated it when her father took that tone with her. Nevertheless, something was wrong, so she began moving back the way she had come, waving her friends over.

Suddenly, a dark shape leapt around the house, from the direction of the scream. It was massive, ran on all fours, but held a disturbingly human shape. Its skin was gray, but slicked with sweat. Its hands formed ugly claws and its jaws held unnaturally long teeth. Its eyes... it looked terrified. Those eyes found Rael and it sprinted forward.

Jak couldn’t look away, couldn’t run. She only watched as her father drew his bow, and fired. The monster howled and staggered, its momentum taking it almost to the wagon. It thrashed, still alive but in pain. Without pause, Rael drew his knife and embedded it to the hilt in the creature’s heart. It snarled but soon collapsed and lay still.

“GO!” Rael shouted at Jak.

She suddenly realized that the demon was not alone. More dark shapes were emerging from around street corners and across rooftops. Jak didn’t take a moment more to look. She sprinted towards the mayor’s house, yelling at her friends to join her. Paul, Ella, and many

of the others who had attended the Branding had drifted out of the house, but turned around as Jak caught up to them. She spared one glance to see her father loosing arrow after arrow at the beasts, then throwing down the bow and reaching for his spear as they drew closer.

At the Lord Mayor's house, Naomi waved them all in. A few moments later, and they were inside. Jak slammed the door behind her.

She took a deep breath, feeling the blood pounding around her ears, and tried to think. What was going on? What were these creatures? They didn't look anything like any predators she had ever heard of. And besides, they looked far too...human, to be beasts.

"Demons!" panted Paul, as if reading her thoughts. "Those were... real demons!"

Jak could not argue. It was the only explanation that made sense. Everyone had heard of demons of course, humans perverted by the misuse of branding, but everyone always assumed that they were a rare occurrence, brought on by a tragic mistake. A small mistake in branding didn't account for this many demons. It had to be from some kind of rogue Gifter creating an army. That was the only explanation.

"Where is Gabriel?" Jak asked Naomi. She didn't suspect the kindly old man, not when her father had known and trusted him. But perhaps, if a Gifter was responsible for creating the demons, another Gifter would know how to deal with them.

"I don't know," Naomi sounded out of breath, "He left the house a moment before everything started. The Lord Mayor went with him."

Jak cursed. That meant they were alone.

They all huddled together, the older children comforting the younger. They could hear the commotion outside, screams and loud noises rang through the air. No one dared to look out the window, fearing what they might see, or what might see them. Time passed, and the screams continued.

A sound caused everyone to freeze: a crashing sound from something moving outside, behind the house. Something was there, something large. They grouped together motionless, not daring to breathe.

Another sound came, this time from the side of the house. Jak could faintly make out a soft sniffing sound. A demon was stalking them.

She pointed towards the kitchen, mouthing the word "knives." Naomi nodded and they began to move, with the rest following close behind. But with that many feet moving, it was impossible to stave off the noise. Floor boards creaked, and the sniffing stopped. Jak waved her hands to tell everyone to stop moving. They obeyed, some visibly

shaking. One of the younger girls was whimpering, looking like she was about to cry. Jak, Paul, and Naomi continued forward until they were in the kitchen one room over. Naomi found the knives and began to pass them out to Jak and Paul, who tiptoed back to the rest of the children. They handed knives to each of them.

Jak wasn't sure what a kitchen knife would do to a demon, especially when wielded by untrained youths. Rael had taught Jak some basic self-defense, but she was sure it wouldn't be enough against a demon. But still, it helped to be doing something while the demon stalked them outside. And perhaps they would get lucky.

They listened to see if they could still hear the demon. Another crash sounded outside, this time in front of them. It had circled around, and its sniffing increased, tracking them to the front door.

Paul drew close to Jak and Naomi. "I'm going out there." He whispered, brandishing his own knife.

"Are you crazy!" Jak tried to keep her voice down. "It will kill you."

"I can do it," He said, sounding braver than he looked. "I'm stronger now." He held his brand hand up high.

"Your brand isn't going to do you any good if it eats you!" Jak couldn't believe what Paul was thinking.

"I'm going anyway. Everyone go upstairs and lock all the doors. I'll try to hold it off here."

Before Jak could protest further, Paul was walking to the front door. Jak quickly motioned everyone up the stairs like Paul said. Naomi took the lead and hurried everyone away. Jak stayed behind to watch what happened to Paul.

He took a deep breath, hand still gripping the knife. Then he opened the door and rushed outside.

A snarling sound greeted his arrival, and a moment later, the demon was upon Paul. He didn't even have time to scream. The moment he appeared, the demon had him, its clawed hands digging into Paul's flesh, its jaws closing in on his neck.

Jak screamed. Without thinking, she ran outside, brandishing her own knife. She raised it and plunged it deep into the demon's back as its attention was focused on Paul. A high-pitched scream echoed through the street, and it rounded on Jak. The knife was still embedded in its back, and Jak lost her grip on it as the demon turned. Then Jak saw other dark shapes answering the scream of their brother. They were closing in. The demon in front of her raised itself on its legs, so it was standing. So like a human in form, but so like an animal in the way it behaved. Its all-too-human eyes kept darting back and forth with the same terrified expression that she had seen on that first demon. The expression would have confused Jak had she not

been so terrified herself.

Its hand whipped the air, and knocked Jak several feet away. All the air left her lungs and she felt a sharp pain in her chest as she landed. The blow hurt, badly. She had only a moment to glance at the demon before it lunged. It was about to tear her apart like it had Paul. Jak closed her eyes and waited for the pain.

The demon screamed. Jak opened her eyes to look at it. A spear was protruding out of its chest, directly above the place where Jak lay. Black blood dripped from the tip of the spear, landing on Jak's face. She grimaced, feeling the warmth of the black blood trickle down one cheek. Then, the demon body slumped to one side.

What had just happened? Spears didn't just appear out of thin air. And this one looked like her father's. Perhaps he...she looked ahead, in the direction the spear had come, and saw the last thing she expected to see. Her savior was a young man, probably not much older than she. He had on bright armor strapped together with red leather. There was a strange symbol in the center of the chestplate and intricate designs were etched all over the armor. He had an equally shiny helmet that protected the sides and top of his head, leaving most of the face exposed. It was a beautiful face.

The man, no not a man, he was barely older than she was, strode toward her and reached one arm forward. Jak offered her hand as well, thinking he was going to help her to her feet. But instead, he grabbed the spear, placed one foot on the dead demon, and pulled it loose.

That was when Jak noticed that they were not alone. More demons were approaching from all sides. Lots of them, maybe a dozen?

The newcomer stepped forward to meet them. His spear was raised in a defensive stance. The first demon lunged.

And Jak's mouth fell open.

The demon fell almost before Jak registered that the man had stabbed it with the spear. A moment later and the spear was free again. The man began weaving in and out of the oncoming demons, taking them down one at a time. Side step, stab, left feint, stab. Howls filled the air as one by one, the demons fell. He made the fighting look easy, he made it look like...art. It took only moments before all of the demons were lying dead at his feet.

She stared at him, mouth hanging open. The young man took a moment to collect himself and then turned to her.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

She nodded, mouth still slightly open. The man offered a hand and she took it, helping her up.

"Don't worry," he said, taking her silence for fear. "The Watchers are here."

The Watchers? That was when Jak first noticed others dressed like this newcomer. From her vantage point on the hill, she could see them running around town, coming from all directions, as if they had surrounded the village. All the remaining demons were falling left and right as the Watchers cut them down. The man who saved Jak's life grinned triumphantly at his comrades.

She managed to point at the house, "There are children in there, you should keep them safe."

"I will see to it personally," he said, and began shaking the demon blood off his spear.

Jak wanted to keep staring at the boy, but another glance at his spear reminded her.

"Father!" she cried. "I need to find my father."

"No worries miss, we'll find him."

But Jak wasn't listening anymore. She ran as fast as she could, away from the Lord Mayor's house towards Main Street. She hadn't seen any sign of her father since he ordered her away and ran in that direction.

When she arrived at Main Street, she looked both ways. She couldn't see her father anywhere. Others of the Watchers were exterminating the remaining demons, some with Firedancing brands, fire shooting out of their fingers. There were only a few demons left.

She kept running down the street, calling for her father as she went. It wasn't long before she saw a circle of dead demons, dozens of them. Standing near them was a Watcher, and he was kneeling next to someone lying in the middle of the dead demons. No!

Jak came closer, no longer running, hoping that each step she took would not reveal what she thought it would. But as she drew clearer, the face of the man lying on the ground became visible. It was cut and slashed in half a dozen different places, but it was still recognizable. Rael, her father.

"No," she said aloud, completely ignoring the Watcher who stood there. "NO!"

Her father had his spear in one hand, his hunting knife in the other, blood dripped from their tips. All of the demons surrounding him bore their marks. But Jak didn't care. All she saw was the wicked gashes across his chest and neck. Red blood pooled and mixed with the black blood of the demons. He was, quite obviously, dying.

"Dad?" she asked to the open air. "Father!"

"Jak." He raised a hand to cup her cheek. "I'm so sorry, I couldn't..."

"You saved us," was all she could think to say. "You did it."

"The Watchers?" he gasped and choked out blood.

"You held the demons off until they could get here," she said, and



she felt her tears begin to run freely.

Rael reached out a hand and grasped her arm. He was still choking on his own blood, but through it all, he managed a few more words. "He...fears you," he said. "Find...Karlo..."

But that was all he could manage. He couldn't finish the word, but Jak knew what he meant. *Find Karlona*. Her mother.

She knelt next to him, completely ignoring the pool of black and red blood, and cradled his head in her hand as his body went limp. Everything was numb. She couldn't think, couldn't cry. She couldn't do anything but hold him there. She rocked him back and forth, trying to breathe life back into her father. Perhaps if she had chosen a different brand, she could have saved him. Something useful in combat like Strength or Flamedancing.

Others gathered around her, watching in pity, though most had their own concerns.

"He died well," a voice spoke to her. It was the Watcher who had been kneeling next to her father when she found him. He stood tall now, with the same armor she saw on all the other Watchers, but with a few distinguishing marks on his shoulders. He was probably a leader. He also had black hair, which was unusual. Jak only knew of herself and...

Jak cursed herself for the distraction. Her father was dead, and here she was thinking about hair.

The man looked like he was going to say something more, but stopped.

The young Watcher from before had arrived. He saluted the black-haired Watcher, then joined him in looking down at Rael's corpse. Pity on his face. Jak felt the irrational urge to lash out at them. She didn't want their pity! But no, her father had taught her better than that. Treat all living beings with respect. Even demons couldn't help their circumstances.

She would have stayed there, but she heard the Watcher leader say something about cleaning this up. No, they couldn't take him away! She resisted as hands tore her away from her father. She screamed as multiple arms held her, and more still carried her father away from her. She didn't look at who held her, didn't care.

Eventually, her father was gone, placed in a line with the rest of the dead. There were so many of them! The Watchers that held her away finally released her, and she fell to her knees, trying to keep the sobs at bay. That was when she saw her father's hunting knife and spear, still bloody on the ground.

She took the spear and held it level with her eyes. Black blood stained the length of the blade, and dripped off its sharpened edge. Good. They deserved it. They...

No! She almost heard her father speak to her from beyond. These demons didn't ask for their fate, even if they killed everyone in the village. Killing them was necessary, but it wasn't...good.

She stood, wiped the spear on a nearby patch of grass, and held it in front of her. It belonged to her now.

A cold steel glint came to her green eyes. She stood alone in the village square, while soldiers mopped up the remains of the dead, and surviving villagers worked and cried over the destruction. She heard none of it. She only stood resolute, a pillar of pain.

Her father may have treated her harshly from time to time, limiting her freedom, and treating her like someone who couldn't take care of herself. But he had taught her decency, and now that teaching kicked in. Grabbing a shovel from a nearby Watcher wagon, she walked two blocks to a large patch of field that lay on the edge of the town. She began to dig.

She dug until her hands were blistered and raw, while everyone went about their business. She dug one grave for her father, then started on another, and another. Eventually, others saw what she was doing and started to help. Even some of the Watchers saw the efforts and joined in. Jak kept at her task, allowing it to consume her, and it took a moment for her to even realize she was surrounded by people.

Her thoughts turned to her father's dying words. *He fears you.* What could her father possibly mean by that? Who feared her, and why would anyone fear her? She was no threat to anyone.

The second part made more sense, but also brought up more questions. *Find Karlona.* That was the name of Jak's mother, though she knew little more than that. For all she knew, her mother was dead. All her father would tell her was that Karlona had been lost in the mountains. Surely, if she were still alive she would have returned by now and found a way back to her family. *Find Karlona.* Did this mean that she was still alive?

"Jak! Relics, you're alive!" A voice broke Jak out of her thoughts. She turned in the direction of the voice. It was Marek. He was still alive somehow. Jak felt a twinge of relief, but nothing seemed to bolster her spirits right now. His parents were both there with him, doing their best to stay close to their son.

"What happened?" Marek asked as he drew closer and grabbed her free hand. Jak winced as Marek touched the inflamed skin of her hand. He noticed her wince, and with a glance at her hand, quickly let go. His eyes were nothing but concern for her. He was good like that. He noticed things. And right now, he seemed to notice the look on her face.

Marek continued speaking, "Are you okay, Jak? How did you get away?"

Jak tried to look nonchalant. She could do that, right? She didn't want him to look any more concerned than he did already. "I'm fine. I...I'm glad you're still alive."

Marek nodded. "My parents and I only survived because we hid in

our cellar, where we keep the perishables. A demon almost found us before one of those Watchers killed it and saved us. Can you believe it? Watchers, here in Riverbrook. What luck!”

Marek stopped talking as his eyes moved to the shovel Jak was holding, then at the freshly dug graves. There it was. His face whitened just a bit, and he turned back to Jak with renewed concern. “Where’s your dad? Is he helping them clean up?” He looked around, eyes searching for Rael.

“He’s....” Jak stumbled, words failing her. “He fought dozens of demons. He was the only one fighting them, until the Watchers showed up. But by then...”

Marek must have seen the pain in Jak’s eyes, because he took a step forward and took her hand in his again. Gently this time. No pain. Instead his touch was soft and comforting. “Oh Jak, oh I’m so sorry!”

She turned away from him and dropped her shovel, pulling her arm away from his grip. She couldn’t talk to him right now, couldn’t process everything that was happening. So she left Marek standing there and walked towards the center of the village square, where a large crowd had gathered. Some were still crying, others looked stone-faced. That was more like she felt, but inside a tumult of emotions was raging. She wasn’t sure how to sort it all out.

One of the Watchers, the black-haired leader, looked like he was about to speak.

“People of Riverbrook! Please gather.”

Jak listened. She wanted to hear what this man had to say, this man who had witnessed the death of her father. Others gathered closer, maybe thirty people in all. The village supported much more than that, but most of them were probably still hiding elsewhere. Jak was able to make out Naomi and several of the younger children who had barricaded themselves inside the mayor’s house.

“We are filled with sorrow for what has taken place here today,” the Watcher continued, “Riverbrook has suffered a terrifying attack by a herd of demons. We’ve sent people to the surrounding farms, but we are not hopeful that many of them survived. That means that all of you represent the majority of the survivors.”

What? Surely more people made it out.

“My name is Kuldain. The men and women who saved your life today are under my command. And we will keep you safe. Unfortunately, we cannot do this if you remain in Riverbrook. I’m afraid you will have to leave, temporarily.”

Mutters and shouts echoed through the crowd. No one had expected this, not even Jak. People knew of the existence of demons, but no one suspected that they posed this kind of threat. One villager,

who seemed to be thinking along the same lines, shouted, "But you killed all of the demons!"

Kuldain nodded, "This was only one small group. More live in the mountains and caves. They are growing bold and hunt in packs. Believe me, it's only a matter of time before they overrun this area of the kingdom. The only reason we were here to help, is because we've been tracking this particular band of demons for two weeks now. They move fast, and we will not always be here to protect you. Your only hope is to migrate to a larger city, one with a standing militia. Once we eradicate the demons, it will be safe for you to return."

"How did so many demons come out of nowhere!" another villager yelled, "I thought they were rare."

"We don't know for certain. I'm convinced that they came out of the mountains, where the Fae live, breeding a new species of demon."

A few concerned murmurs spread through the crowd. Jak remembered hearing something about these "Fae" the Watcher referred to, but they didn't make demons, only Gifters could do that. At least, that's what she had been taught. According to folklore, the Fae were a group of people who perverted themselves into a special kind of demon. They lived in the mountains and snatched up passing children. Most assumed they were a myth, told to young children to keep them from straying too far from home. But Jak knew better. Her father had known something about them, and always insisted that they weren't demons.

Kuldain kept speaking, "Others of my comrades think there may be a few rogue Gifters who are creating a demon army of their own."

Yes, that sounded more plausible, given what Jak knew about branding and demons. If a Gifter wanted to, he could create a small army of demons. That thought reminded Jak of Gabriel. She hadn't seen him since before the attack. Could he be somehow involved in all this? But no, she didn't think so. The man had been very kind and her father trusted him. She couldn't see him raising a demon army. But doubt still hung on her mind.

She needed to find the Gifter, if he was still alive. Without thinking, she began to move away from the crowd, while others continued to barrage the Watcher with questions. She had heard all she wanted to hear. She needed to find Gabriel. With her father gone, he was all she had left.

A few moments later she was out of the square and searching up and down the streets, looking for the Gifter. She did her best to avoid other Watchers who were also looking for stragglers. Part of her realized that, if Gabriel was still alive, then the Watchers would probably find him eventually, but she needed to search for him herself. Something drove her to do so.

She started looking near the Lord Mayor's house, since that was where she saw him last. But she found nothing. She peeked her head inside nearby shops and houses, many of which had broken-down doors or windows. No one was there. At least, no one alive was there.

She froze as a sound met her ears. It sounded like someone was moving inside one of the cottages near the northern edge of the city. She looked and couldn't see anything in the dimming light. So she drew closer.

"Mr. Gabriel," she called out as loudly as she dared. "Is that you?"

The sounds of movement stopped for a brief moment, and she knew that whatever made the noise had heard her.

Suddenly, a dark shape hurtled through the open door. There was another demon, still alive!

Jak felt ready this time. In a moment, her father's spear came to bear. She braced herself as the demon charged toward her.

Just as the demon was about to pounce on her, a spear came out of nowhere and lodged itself in the demon's chest, sending it tumbling to one side. It thrashed for a moment, then lay still.

Jak whirled in the direction the spear had come from. It was the young Watcher who had saved her earlier. Had he been following her?

"I had that!" she yelled at him.

He looked confused. "I was just trying to help. It was about to jump at you."

"Yeah, and I was ready for it." She brandished the spear at him.

"Sorry, I thought...you know...since the last time."

"You thought that because you saved me from a demon earlier, that I would be defenseless against this one?"

"Well...I wouldn't put it that way, but..."

"But nothing, go away." She didn't mean to snap at him like that. But with everything going on, she couldn't really predict her own reactions right now.

"Look, I was just trying..."

"I said go away." She began marching in the opposite direction.

"I can't, all villagers are supposed to remain in the village square for the night. They don't want anyone wandering."

So he had been following her.

"I can take care of myself. I'm just trying to find someone."

"Who?"

She sighed, and turned back to the young man, "There was a Gifter here. I'm supposed to go with him to Skyecliff." She raised her hand, showing him the brand there. "I can't go with the rest of you to Tradehall."

The Watcher put up his hands in a gesture of peace, "I know you're hurt. Everyone is suffering, and you want to do something about it.

But we have Watchers searching the entire region. If he's still alive, we'll find him."

Jak hesitated. It was true that the Watchers could probably do a better job at finding the Gifter. But she couldn't just sit around and do nothing.

The young man seemed encouraged by her hesitation, for he continued. "If we find him, you're free to go with him to Skyecliff. We won't stop a Gifter, though I imagine Kuldain will want to speak with him before he leaves."

"He's not a rogue Gifter," Jak said.

"I never said he was."

Jak sighed. She could see no way out of this. This young man wasn't going to leave her alone until she returned to the square.

"I don't suppose you could just...let me keep looking for him?"

The boy's mouth opened and he shrugged in a gesture of helplessness, "I'm sorry. I have orders."

"Of course you do."

"Look, if the Gifter is alive, it won't be long before we find him. And even if we don't, once we get to Tradehall I'm sure you can find someone who will take you to Skyecliff."

"To practice a useless gift." Jak said, almost under her breath.

The boy must have heard her, for he replied, "Gifting isn't a useless power. It's one of the most needed brands in the region. Gifters are in short supply these days."

"And for good reason. I can't believe I ever wanted to study brands."

He took another step forward, "You're just shaken up. Come on, let me take you back to..."

"Shaken up!" Jak let it all come loose. "My town is in ruins, I watched my friend die, and my father is...is...." She couldn't say it. Not yet. "And perhaps if I had a brand like Strength, Speed, or Grace, maybe I could have done something about it."

"No one could have predicted what happened."

Jak was tired of this boy trying to make her feel better. Without another word she turned on her heel and stormed toward the town square again. Perhaps they wouldn't find the Gifter. Fine. She didn't want her brand anyway. Not anymore. In just a few short hours, her desire to learn had been replaced with devastation and anger. The problem was, she didn't exactly know who she was angry at, and that only frustrated her further.

The boy followed, but from a distance, letting her find her own way back. That was good. She didn't want to talk to anyone right now, least of all him.

When she arrived at town square, the first thing she noticed were

Watchers looting the store owned by Marek's parents. They were grabbing everything they could, especially the smoked and fermented foods. Jak almost called out to them, to ask them to stop. That food belonged to Marek's family! Then she saw her friend's parents watching from the sidelines, pained expressions on their faces.

Forgetting herself for a moment, Jak ran to their side. "What's going on?" she asked.

"Kuldain, their leader, said we need to take all possible resources with us, for the good of the whole." Said Naman, Marek's father. He kept staring at his store, or what was his store, barely even acknowledging Jak's presence.

"But that's your food!" Jak said.

"We know, but Kuldain says we won't be coming back here anytime soon. Says it's too dangerous right now, and we need to band together."

Jak looked to the square, where the Watcher leader was standing. The young boy who had followed her now approached his commanding officer and the rest of his comrades. Perhaps they had been responsible for saving the lives of the remaining villagers. But at what cost?

Jak walked away from the store, deciding not to think about it for now. She had too much on her mind to worry about something more.

As she approached the Watchers, she noticed what they were doing. There were various wagons that had arrived in her absence, maybe twelve of them. Probably supply vehicles that followed after the Watchers, once they had cleared the town of demons. That was where they were taking all the food and supplies from the store. Watchers were now positioning the wagons in a circle, with the largest ones facing either end of main street. Other wagons from local villagers joined the circle. Jak recognized her father's wagon among them. They probably took all the food and supplies from there as well.

They were arranging wagons in a protective circle. In the center, the Watchers started a large fire, using the broken remains of houses and wagons too far gone from the demon attack. Others were handing out blankets to the remaining villagers. Was this really everyone that was still alive?

"We leave for Tradehall at first light!" a voice called out. It was Kuldain, the Watcher leader. "You can rest soundly tonight. We will protect you."

Jak wanted to roll her eyes, but found them drooping instead. Seeing the warm fire and the blankets reminded her of how tired she was. But she didn't want to sleep with the rest of the group. She needed time to herself. She thought about leaving again, but glancing at the young Watcher who had stopped her earlier put that out of her



mind. He kept glancing in her direction, watching.

“Hey Jak!” it was Marek again. She didn’t really want to talk at the moment, but she also didn’t have the heart to tell him to go away.

“Hey Marek, what is it?”

“Where’d you go? You missed the big announcement.”

“I was looking for someone. What announcement?”

“The leader, that Kuldain fellow, he said that they’re willing to recruit any young men or women who want to join the Watchers!” He sounded almost giddy with excitement. “I joined up! What do you think?”

Jak nodded, “I’m happy for you,” she said finally, though she didn’t really feel much of anything at the moment.

Marek hesitated, noting the look on her face. He seemed to be trying to cheer her up from the way he made himself look so excited. Perhaps once she could have appreciated the sentiment, but she had little patience for it now. Regardless, Marek continued. “And that Kuldain, the leader. He’s a Blood-burner Jak! A real Blood-burner! I thought they were illegal.”

“A rare few become Blood-burners at the request of the Queen.” Jak recited. She had learned that a few years ago and recorded it in her journal. She said it now with little enthusiasm.

“Come on, this is exciting stuff. You should join too!”

Jak scoffed. “A fat lot of help I would be.”

“You just haven’t had the training the Watchers had. Enough practice, and you could be just as good.”

“You forget that I don’t have the type of brand most Watchers would want. Soldiers need Strength, Grace, Firedancing, Telekinesis. What do I have?”

“I’m sure they would find something. They have a huge variety of brands in the Watchers. They paired me with a Telekenetic to help train me now that...” he trailed off. Now that her father was dead. Without the town’s only Telekenetic, of course Marek would need to find another mentor.

“Hey, Jak, I mean... I’m so sorry about your father. I shouldn’t have...if you need anything, you know I’m here for you, right?”

“Until we reach Tradehall and you leave with the Watchers.” Jak responded. She didn’t mean to sound cold, but it came out that way. Marek paused for a moment, then stepped away. Part of Jak wanted to stop him, to tell him to hold her in his arms until the morning, but she didn’t. She let him go.

She had one more task to complete. Walking just outside the square, to the holes she had dug earlier, she found several Watchers arranging the dead in a line. They had dug a much larger hole as a mass grave. Probably quicker that way. They were also piling demons

in a massive mound about a hundred yards further. A Flamedancer extended one arm and a burst of flame enveloped the mound of demons.

Jak approached the nearby bodies, saying nothing as she scanned them. Finally, she found her father, still covered in blood, but looking strangely peaceful. Jak looked away. Looking at his face...she was surprised by how alive it still looked. Weren't dead people supposed to look like empty shells? Why could she still see emotion in his face?

She put that out of her mind and grabbed his legs, dragging him away towards the pit she had dug earlier. She wasn't going to let him rot in a mass grave. Other Watchers saw what she was doing but none of them intervened. When she glanced at them, they looked away. It soured her mood further. She didn't want their pity.

She rolled her father's body into the pit, then took one more look before picking up a shovel. As she pushed the dirt back into place, her mood oddly improved. No, she shouldn't be feeling better. Broken Brands, she was burying her father! How was she even functional? She should be crying or...or at least angry.

Instead she felt strangely comforted as she scooped the final piece of dirt onto her father's grave, then walked to her father's wagon, climbed inside and curled up. She had no blanket, but she didn't really care. It wouldn't have helped her fall asleep any faster. She still had her journal, tucked away in her sack, so she gripped it while memories of her father kept her from sleep.

But a sneaking desire began to creep up in her mind. She looked at the Watchers standing guard around them. Protecting people, carrying spears that looked like what her father had carried. Had he been a Watcher and never told her? It would explain a lot. Perhaps it would be nice to join them. If her father had served with them, it would be one way to honor his memory. And at the very least, she might find out more about his past, that one thing he hardly ever talked about. Perhaps there were others that knew him.

That thought was what stayed with her until she finally fell asleep.

“G et up!” A man’s voice yelled through the makeshift camp.

“Rise and shine!” The groans and chatter of people waking and gathering their things overtook the quiet chirps and hums of insects in the morning air. Jak yawned, stretching out the pinching places in her back and legs, taking her time because she didn’t have anything more to pack up than the clothes she was wearing and her father’s spear.

A Watcher with a large sack of food began distributing a meager breakfast to everyone gathered there. Jak licked her lips. Relics, she was hungry. Leaping from the wagon to get her share, she devoured it in seconds, having not eaten anything since her breakfast the morning before. So much had happened in that single day. It was odd that suddenly she felt like she had less control of her life than she had before her father died. She had always blamed him for his restrictions, but here she was forced to accompany the Watchers with the rest of her villagers, forced to give up her father’s food and belongings, and worst of all, she no longer had the choice on which brand to choose. She was stuck with the one she had.

Taking another bite, she glanced down at her left hand, seeing the lines darkening her flesh. Where was Gabriel? Perhaps if he was here she could at least go with him to Skyecliff, instead of trudging away in the opposite direction with the Watchers. But going to look for him was another things she couldn’t do now.

Kuldain barked several orders, and the wagons that ringed the town square began to move, forming a line leading out of town. Some were driven by horses, where horses were available, but others had a Telekinetic sitting calmly onboard, their brands glowing as they moved the wagons with their minds. Now that would have been a useful brand, one of the most powerful they had known, and Jak had been lucky enough to have a father who could teach her. But not anymore. That option was long past.

Jak rose and felt her feet start to move with the caravan, just as she saw the other villagers do. Few looked like they were enjoying themselves. All of them, Jak included, just put one foot in front of the

other.

That was how they moved for a long time, leaving their home for what might be forever. Who knows what fate would await them in Tradehall. Some, like Marek's parents, would probably find work in the large markets there. They had experience with trade, and could hold their own in a big city like Tradehall. But most would have no clue what to do when they got there. They weren't merchants or soldiers. If they couldn't find a place outside of the city for farming, there wasn't much they could do.

Jak stumbled and nearly fell, taking several large steps to catch herself. Wow, she couldn't even walk right, apparently, much less become an accomplished Gifter without a teacher present. Perhaps there might be a Gifter in Tradehall who would take her under his wing, or send her with enough provisions to get to Skyecliff. That was assuming she still wanted to be a Gifter. The thought was far less attractive to her than it was just a day earlier. Back then, she had friends and family to return to when she wasn't studying. She had people to be proud of her. She had nothing now.

They kept walking until the sun shone bright in the sky, never stopping. When the older or younger members of the group grew too tired, they were placed in a wagon. Jak walked with the rest of them. One foot in front of the other, until their village had disappeared behind them. They followed the road with the mountains to their left, moving steadily west. Once, Marek came through looking for her, but Jak quietly hid herself behind a wagon. She didn't want to talk to anyone. Talking would mean she'd have to talk about...

"You know, it's generally considered impolite to avoid your friends," said a voice beside her. She jumped and spun on the spot. It was the young Watcher boy.

"You're not my friend," she said after collecting herself.

"Well we can talk freely then!" he laughed at his own joke. Jak didn't join in. "I was just referring to your other friend back there. He was calling for you."

"I heard."

"And why would you avoid him?"

"I don't think it's any of your business." Jak said sharply.

A voice called out from behind them, "Don't waste your breath talking to that wet blanket!"

Jak and the young Watcher both turned to see who had spoken. It was Estel, Jak noted with a grimace. How on Earth did that girl avoid getting killed by the demons. She now bore some light armor and insignia, indicating she too had joined the Watchers. She was travelling on horseback with an older woman that Jak had seen with Colonel Kuldain, probably one of his officers. She glanced quickly at

the woman's left hand. The black hashmarks zigzagged in a jagged, almost wavy patten. A Firedancer, like Estel. This must have been the new mentor that Estel received upon joining the Watchers.

"Mind your tongue, Estel," the officer said, frowning at her protégé. "The girl has just lost her father." How did this woman know that? Estel did as ordered, but continued smirking at Jak as they overtook her. Jak watched them go.

"That was Major Skellig, the Colonel's second in command." said the young Watcher, "And it looks like you already know her apprentice."

"She's one of the most evil people alive." Jak said under her breath, still staring at the horses ahead of her.

The young man stopped speaking, and Jak finally looked at him to see his arms folded and his face turned skyward, as if trying to figure out what to say. Finally, he looked at her again. She looked away. "Look, I don't want to bother you."

"Then go away."

"I just think...a lot of people here, they lost friends and family members too. But most of them still have someone. You don't, but you could. It might help."

Jak said nothing, just kept walking forward with her face staring at the ground. The young man paused for a moment, like he was carefully planning what he would say next.

"I, uh, could help with that if you want. I know we don't know each other. I mean, we don't even know each other's names."

Jak preferred to keep it that way, but continued to say nothing. Maybe if she was quiet long enough, the Watcher boy would just go away. Yet...wouldn't it be nice if she had someone to talk to? No, she couldn't...shouldn't bother. It wouldn't help her situation and it wouldn't bring her father back.

"Okay then, I'll go first. My full name is Naemiltratoamogg!" he said with an air of triumph, like it was a great name.

Despite herself, Jak felt a chuckle escape her. The young man looked at her in surprise. It surprised her too. Without her bidding, her mouth opened rapidly and a laugh escaped, the first time she had laughed since receiving her brand. She shut her mouth to try, desperately, to regain her composure, but small giggles kept breaking through the facade.

"So..." she said through the giggles, "So, you're telling me that your forename is 'Name'?"

The look on his face sent her laughing again. "It's spelled differently!" he said indignantly. "And it's ancient. It's a high and noble....uh, name."

That sent Jak over the edge. She busted out in laughter, doubling

over and clutching a growing stitch in her side. Why was she laughing so hard? It wasn't that funny that the guy had a name called Naem. But she kept laughing, spurred on by the expression on his face. Others paused to look at her, and Naem glanced around with an embarrassed expression. She had to get ahold of herself!

When she finally calmed down, she wiped tears from her eyes. Wow, but that had felt good. His face was still indignant. "Are you done?" he asked.

Jak nodded, still wiping tears from her eyes.

"Well, after that catastrophe, it's only fair that you tell me your name."

"It's Jak," she said. "Jaknilteksnewodheghoma."

"Well Jak," he said, "It was a pleasure to meet you. Now I'm less certain."

"Oh come on, it's just a...name." And she nearly started giggling again.

"No, no...none of that. Let's just move on, shall we?"

Jak nodded. The mirth of the moment was starting to wear off, and she almost felt guilty for laughing. She shouldn't be happy given her present situation.

A horn sounded near the front of the caravan, where most of the Watchers led the group.

Naem's head rose at the sound. "Sorry, I have to go," he said, and he began running ahead.

Jak followed, though a few paces behind. She didn't want him to know she was following. By the time she reached the front of the caravan, the Watchers had stopped at a small stream. Kuldain was stepping onto the back of a wagon.

"We will set up camp here for the night," he said, straightening. Jak hadn't even realized that the sun was already setting. They had been walking all day.

"We will come to a crossroads in just a few more days, where most of us will have to leave you, so I'd like to remind everyone that we will still accept capable men and women to join us on our way to Foothold."

Mutters rose from the crowd,

Kuldain raised his voice. "My party and I have been tasked with finding the Fae in the mountains, as you know. Once we reach the crossroads, my lieutenant, a man I trust, will take you north-west to Tradehall. We anticipate no demon threats, though some of my best men will accompany you for your protection. I and the rest of my band will take the other road, to where the Fae are rumored to live."

The Fae. That was the second time that Kuldain had mentioned them. Stories were told in the village about them, stories to frighten

children. Her father was the only one Jak knew who didn't believe the stories. When Jak had asked about them, he never said much. He only said that the rumors of stealing babies or killing travelers were complete folk tales. Once, when she was younger and always dirty from running around with Marek, they'd been playing Demons and Fae and the other kids had been talking about demons who would come and steal you in your sleep. Jak woke up one night, screaming from nightmares about sharp clawed child-eating monsters. Rael sat in her room that night, cradling her and telling her she was safe. "Demon's aren't real. Fae exist, but you don't have to worry about them, Jak."

Jak nearly slapped a hand to her forehead. How had she missed it before! The only lead she had on her mother was that she had been lost in the mountains. Specifically the mountains where the Fae lived! Perhaps the Fae would know what happened to her. It was just a hunch. Her mother had disappeared in the mountains while on an expedition with Gifters to learn more about alchemy, or the study of brands on inanimate objects. None of them had ever returned. But surely the Fae or someone knew where they went. Rael wouldn't have given her the task if it was impossible.

She had to go with the Watchers. If they were seeking the Fae, she'd have the best chance of finding them if she tagged along.

Kuldain gave a few orders and people began to settle down for the night, then stood with his officers as Jak approached.

Naem saw her coming and went to meet her. "I think Kuldain wants all the villagers to stick togeth..."

"I want to come with you," she said, cutting him off. "When we reach the crossroads."

"Oh, ah. Believe me, I'd love for you to come along, but Kuldain is very insistent that all villagers go to Tradehall. I mean, I'm flattered and all..."

Jak rolled her eyes. Were all men so self-centered? He had completely misunderstood why she wanted to go with them. "No, I mean, I want to find the Fae, with the Watchers. I'm not meant for Tradehall. I want to kill demons."

"Soldier!" a voice boomed nearby. "You're needed to help with the food. What's your holdup?"

It was Kuldain. He was looking at the two of them. Naem, flustered, tried to respond, "Sir, I was just...she..."

"Get the pretty lady with the rest of the villagers. We don't have time for you to flirt, boy."

Jak folded her arms. Apparently men did all think alike.

"No sir, I mean, yes sir....I..."

"I want to come with you." Jak spoke directly to Kuldain over the

heads of the other officers.

Kuldain stared at her, then took a few steps forward, looking her up and down, assessing. "I'm afraid we don't have room for any dead weight where we're going."

"I'm not dead weight. I can help. I want to find the Fae and kill any demons that threaten other villages like mine. I will not be a burden to you sir!"

"What skills can you offer? Are you trained in combat?" Kuldain asked.

"Ah...my father taught me the basics of combat." It was partially true. Her father had taught her to hunt, as well as some basic defensive techniques. It was hardly combat training, but she wasn't going to tell him that. "Also, he has agreed to train me," she pointed at Naem, who looked taken aback.

"Me...I," he stammered.

"Is this true, soldier?" Kuldain said, amusement in his face as he watched Naem sputter. Jak met Naem's eyes, trying desperately to will him to agree. He calmed and barely inclined his head at her.

"Yes sir, I did agree to help her out. Assuming you would let her travel with us."

Kuldain acted like he hadn't heard, but continued with his questions to Jak. "What's your brand?"

Jak winced. She knew this would come up. Reluctantly she held up her left hand.

"Gifter eh? Where is your master?"

"I don't know, I couldn't find him after the attack."

"Well we have little use for a Gifter among our ranks. You'd be better off going to Tradehall and finding passage to Skyecliff."

"No sir, please!" Jak said hastily. She needed this man to understand. She might not have much to offer yet, but she would learn. Above all, she needed to go with the Watchers. "My mother was lost in the mountains."

Kuldain turned back to look at her, his eyes widening as if seeing her for the first time. He stared at her for a long moment, long enough that Jak started to wonder if he had heard her correctly. Finally, he said, "You're Rael's little girl?"

The sorrow washed over her, but she pushed it back. "Yes. Did you know him? I saw you standing there after he died."

"I knew him," Kuldain said. "We were friends once, and I remember you too now. You were just a baby, but that hair is unmistakable."

Jak ran a hand through her black hair, placing the red streak behind her ear.

"So you must have known my mother too, then," she said. This



was something she hadn't hoped for. Someone who knew her mother and could tell her more about her. Rael had never said much.

Kuldain adjusted his armor and turned slightly, as if readying to leave. "I knew of her. But I have no time to discuss past memories. You are free to accompany us, and you will adhere to the rules of the band. The Sergeant will fill you in." he waved at Naem.

Jak felt her excitement rise. "Yes, sir!" She performed her best salute, which must have been a poor attempt because Kuldain sneered and turned his attention to Naem.

"And you!" he said. "She is your responsibility. Make sure she trains hard and knows her way around the camp. I don't want her delaying the band in any way."

"Sir, yes sir," said Naem. He was looking as flustered as ever, but less so now that he had direct orders. He gave a crisp salute which Kuldain returned casually before moving away.

Naem turned to Jak. "Well, that was unexpected."

Jak wanted to retort, but secretly she agreed. For a while there, it hadn't looked like she had much of a chance of traveling with the Watchers. What had changed Kuldain's mind? Was it just his past relationship with Jak's father? Jak doubted that was the only reason. And that troubled her.

"You'll need to make sure you have all your supplies before we split from the other villagers in a few days."

Jak shook her head. "All I have is my father's spear. And my journal." She patted her sack.

Naem nodded, "Okay, well stay close to me. I'll make sure you get a ration and a bed. We don't have much while we're traveling, but you should be more comfortable than the back of that wagon."

She shot him a look. Had he been watching her last night? Well, she supposed she shouldn't expect less from someone called a 'Watcher.' Still, she wasn't sure about Naem. She couldn't quite figure out if she was a curiosity to him, or something more. She was taking a risk asking him to train her, but she had seen him fight. If anyone could turn her into something useful, it would be him.

A few moments later and everyone settled in for the night.

Jak followed suit, but found herself staying up late. But this time, it wasn't the horrors of seeing her father die that kept her awake, but the prospect of finding her mother.

The next day, Jak woke with a start as Naem entered her tent

while beating a pot with a stick.

“It’s time to wake up,” he said loudly and with a bit too much enthusiasm. Jak covered her ears and groaned. It was still dark outside. Naem continued speaking loudly. “We leave at dawn, so I only have the early morning to train you. You did want to train with the spear, no?”

Jak felt herself waking up. She mumbled a brief, “yes, okay,” which came out as another groan. It took a moment for her to get her bearings and get to her feet. The small blanket she had curled up in hadn’t provided much cushioning, and she was still stiff from the long walk the day before.

“Come on now, time is all we have and it’s leaving.”

Jak almost wanted to hit him, but she was too tired to even try. Besides, she had asked for this. When she followed Naem out of her tent she looked at the sky. She couldn’t even see any hint of the sun rising. Just how early did they have to rise for training?

As her mind began to focus, she felt excitement build in her. She was going to learn how to fight! Something useful for once. She wondered what type of techniques Naem would teach her to use with the spear. Would she even get to spar with him a bit? She hoisted her spear in front of her just as Naem turned and said, “No spears today!”

“Um...what do you mean. We’re here to learn how to use a spear, right?”

“Oh it will take some time before you’re actually ready to handle a real spear. Today we’re starting with footwork.”

Jak felt her excitement drop. She had hoped for something a bit more exciting than footwork. But she shrugged it off. A few simple steps surely wouldn’t take too long.

Naem led her to a small clearing outside the camp and began to show her various stances. He started with a lunge on his right leg, which Jak copied. Then with a fluidity that had to come from his brand of Grace, he switched legs in a fraction of a heartbeat. After a

pause, Jak tried to do the same, and almost fell over backward.

“Hmmm,” said Naem, “This may take some time.”

Jak wanted to slap him, but restrained herself, instead trying again to emulate the stance. She put one foot in front of the other, shifting her weight to the forward leg.

“No, you don’t want all your weight on one side like that. If an opponent were to nudge you in just the right direction...” he followed suit by kicking her thigh just enough for her to lose balance again. She fell and grimaced in the grass before lifting herself back up again. She wasn’t going to give up so easily.

That wasn’t the last time that Naem knocked her over. It happened several times, but after an hour or two, she was starting to get the hang of it. Thoughts of her mother spurred her on. If Jak could follow the Watchers long enough to find out what happened to Karlona, getting knocked down a few times was worth it.

Naem had her repeat several different stances, one right after the other, correcting her as they went. Her legs were starting to grow sore, but she pushed that out of her mind, along with many of the negative emotions she’d felt concerning her father and village. It was a long time before she realized that she was smiling.

Finally the sun was rising, and the bugle sounded for the rest of the camp to wake.

“Alright,” said Naem, “We’ll take a quick break and get back to this after breakfast.”

Jak turned to look at him, “Aren’t we breaking camp after breakfast?”

“We are, but if you ever want to improve you must find ways to practice on the go. Once we finish eating I want you to start down the road, using the stances I’ve taught you to move forward.”

“Instead of walking?” She stared at him like he was crazy.

“You heard me. And you might want to get a head start. Since this is your first time, you’re bound to be slow and the rest of us will almost certainly pass you up in no time.

“Just how long do you want me to keep going?”

“Until we break for lunch.”

“What!? That’s hours from now!”

“And when it’s over, you’ll know these steps intuitively, without having to think about them.”

“But...” Jak didn’t want to say that she was already tired. But in truth, her legs felt like jelly. Hours of alternating through the lunges and stances would no doubt ensure that she would never walk again. But she didn’t want to tell Naem that.

“What’s to stop me from just walking normally once I’m far enough ahead?” she asked.

“Nothing, but you want to learn, don’t you?”

She sighed. She did want to learn. And if it took dead jelly legs to do it, then so be it.

Jak hurriedly ate her breakfast consisting of gruel and some dry bread before setting out down the road. She began moving through the stances, taking big steps forward with each lunge. She hadn’t progressed far when she heard the signal to break camp behind her. A few minutes later and they were already gaining ground on her head start.

One by one, the Watchers and villagers began to pass her with their wagons. Estel made a point of snickering as she passed on horseback. None seemed confused to find a girl making big unnecessary steps in front of them. Apparently this was normal for the Watchers.

Within no time all the wagons had passed her up and only the stragglers lay behind Jak. But she kept putting one foot in front of the other, running through each stance that Naem had taught her.

Naem was waiting for her at the back of the group. “Keep up that pace and you’ll never catch up by lunchtime.” Jak saw the barest hint of a smile on his face. He was enjoying this! Jak increased her speed. She would not let this young man, this boy, take pleasure from watching her struggle.

She managed to keep pace with the band for a while, but it didn’t take long for fatigue to slow her pace. Her legs, which had already felt overtaxed before she started, now felt nearly numb. Jak was sure that if she halted, they would simply stop working and she’d never get back up.

As the sun climbed higher in the sky, the Watchers kept pulling ahead of her. But she could still see them in the distance. Surely it had to be lunch time by now, right? But time seemed to stretch. She gulped, ignoring the yearning in her stomach. The Watchers were far ahead of her now, and she didn’t want to lose sight of them. She thought about stopping her stances and walking to catch up. But at this point, she wasn’t sure her legs had the strength to get her there any faster even by walking normally. So she grit her teeth and kept going.

“What’s amazing to me is that you’re actually going along with this,” a voice said beside her. Her head whipped up to see Marek walking calmly beside her. She hadn’t even seen him approach, she was so absorbed in keeping her legs moving.

“Yeah, well. I have to make up for not having a brand like yours.”

“Well, I think you’re doing a great job. You’re not giving up.”

“Don’t speak too soon,” she answered through gritted teeth. “Also, why aren’t you training like I am?”

Marek shrugged. "Each teacher has different methods I guess. Besides the combat stuff you're doing doesn't matter much for Telekinetics."

"You're a combat Brand. And you're a Watcher. Combat is literally what you do."

He grinned, "Okay maybe I just enjoy watching you struggle."

Jak fixed her eyes on the path ahead. "You and Estel are perfect for each other then." But she found herself smiling. It was nice to have Marek around. "Shouldn't you stay with the group? You're going to be late for lunch."

"It's okay, I thought I might keep you company."

"I'm...not going to be the best conversationalist."

He laughed, "I understand. I'll just be here if you need anything."

Jak didn't say it, but she really appreciated what Marek was doing. He was her friend, he knew that she hated solitude, even though she had forced it on herself of late. Staying with her like this, even without speaking, it lifted her spirits considerably as she forced one foot in front of the other.

They walked in silence for a while, and Jak had lost all sense of time as her legs began to drag, kicking up dust as they went. But, were the wagons ahead of her growing bigger? She was catching up to them! They must have stopped for lunch, finally!

She approached slowly, never stopping her stances, Marek keeping pace with ease. She would not stop and give Naem any satisfaction. When she arrived at the band's temporary rest-stop, she almost fell at the quartermaster's feet. The other Watchers, who were sitting down with their meals, chuckled at seeing her exhaustion. The quartermaster gave her some scraps of bread and she found a place to sit on one of the wagons. Sitting had never felt so good. Marek collected his food and sat nearby, glancing at her with a smile. She smiled back.

"You actually did it," a voice said. It was Naem, who sat himself down beside her, sparing a sideways glance for Marek, who paused to look at them both, then slowly turned away and got back to his food. Naem watched him, then turned to look back at Jak. "Honestly, I didn't think you'd make it this long before giving up on the footwork and catching up."

"That wouldn't help me learn." Jak said through a mouthful of food.

Naem chuckled, "No it wouldn't. Perhaps there's potential in you after all."

The bugle sounded, signaling the end of the break. Jak's shoulders slumped. She had just arrived, and now they were leaving again.

Naem laughed at the disheartened look on her face. "Look, I've

gained permission to let you ride on a wagon for a few hours. Be sure to massage your legs while you're there. It will help them recover. But you'll have to get up again and walk eventually. The worst thing you can do is let your legs rest for too long. You'll never be able to stand on them again if you do."

He rose and strode to the front of the camp. Everyone else got ready to push out again, but Jak climbed into the wagon and began massaging her legs as Naem had instructed. The rest felt good, but it almost hurt in a different way. Within minutes she was already stiff all over. But she'd been stiff before, working on her father's farm. Perhaps the next day would be easier.

She was wrong.

For the next few days, Naem greeted her the same way every morning and they spent several hours rehearsing new techniques, techniques that she was later required to practice while they marched west. It was several days before Naem even let her hold a spear. Well, it wasn't a spear really. It was more of a quarterstaff. But Naem insisted that she practice without a pointed spear first. He kept stressing the idea that the entire staff was a weapon, not just the pointy end. So she had to learn how to use the rest of the staff first before learning how to use a proper spear.

He started by showing her the guards, basic starting positions when defending with the staff. Jak was surprised at how many there were. She thought you just pointed the spear at the oncoming enemy and hoped to hit them. That wasn't right at all. There were guards for short opponents, tall opponents, armored opponents, and animals. The latter was one that Naem stressed since it was most commonly used to fight approaching demons.

It took days, but Naem was surprised at how quickly she was learning. It wasn't for nothing. Her brand was useless to her now, so all she had was her determination. Each day, when Naem assigned her a seemingly impossible task, she threw everything she had into it. Soon, it didn't take as long for her to catch up with the band for lunch. Within weeks, she could keep pace, and her legs no longer felt like jelly. She would move seamlessly from one guard to another, raising her staff above her head with the tip pointing down, bringing it around sharply in front of her, holding it to her side, and so on. She kept her feet moving forward, keeping in step with the rest of the band. They had stopped snickering at her, and a few looked more than a little impressed.

Just a few days' march and they came to the crossroads. Jak joined Marek in saying goodbye to his parents. His mother gave her a hug, whispering in her ear, "We'll be praying for the two of you."

"Watch over him, will you?" Naman said to Jak, smiling and

giving her a light pat on the shoulder.

She nodded and smiled back as Marek's face went indignant. "Watch over me?"

But Kuldain didn't let the goodbyes linger. Moments later Jak and Marek were walking together, away from his parents, and away from the only other people Jak had known growing up. Now it was just her and Marek. Well, and Estel too, though she couldn't have cared less about her.

The Watchers continued to move west, searching for the Fae or other signs of demon packs. But they did nothing but walk during the day, heading as fast as they could to Foothold, at the base of the mountains, where they would then search for the Fae. Kuldain, the Watcher leader, had said nothing to her since agreeing to let her join the march. He always led the band with an air of confidence, but that didn't stop their days from becoming routine.

When Jak brought it up to Naem, he simply shrugged, "That's the way it is for most of us. There are weeks of routine for every five minutes of anything exciting." Many of the other Watchers seemed to share Naem's uncaring attitude, but Jak thought she saw several of them grumbling from time to time.

The leader remained rather distant from the rest of the men. He never joined them for meals or said anything other than to bark orders when it was time to move out. Jak tried to find out more about the man, but the other Watchers were tight lipped. In fact, Jak was pretty sure they were afraid of him at some level. A Blood-burner would do that to a person, no matter how loyal the man was to the kingdom. A Blood-burner, even a legal Blood-burner, was someone you wanted to avoid.

But still, Jak thought, being a Blood-burner was much more useful in their current situation than being a Gifter. If only she could have more than one brand. It was a thought that had followed her ever since the attack on her village. She knew it was technically impossible for someone to have more than one brand. That was one of the mistakes that made demons. Put a second brand on a man and the two brands would fight for dominance. He would transform, screaming in agony, into a misshapen demon. If he didn't die first.

But still, the possibility intrigued Jak. If she ever did find her way back to Skyecliff, she would make it her life's worth to discover the secret to multiple brands.

As she daydreamed about branding, she almost didn't notice Marek approach and sit next to her. It wasn't the first time they had spent time together on this trip. He was good about not pushing her boundaries. Sometimes they simply sat next to each other for a while.

This time he looked like he wanted to talk. It had been a while

since they had a decent conversation, probably since before they split with the villagers at the crossroads. Jak hadn't seen much of him since.

"I'm glad you came," he said. "With the Watchers I mean."

"Yeah, well, I couldn't leave you here with only Estel to keep you company."

Marek laughed, "She has been unbelievable lately. She seriously never leaves me alone. I had to sneak away from my tent to get here."

Jak chuckled. "How are you doing?"

"Well, it's been a bit lonely since we split at the crossroads."

"Yeah," Jak said, her mood souring for a moment.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I am so insensitive. Truly, I'm sorry Jak."

"It's okay," she responded. "It's different for you, I know. You didn't mean to be insensitive."

"Thank you. I'm still here if you need anything."

Jak felt him rest a hand on her shoulder. It wasn't until that moment that she realized how much she needed the comfort. Right now, all she wanted was for him to put his arm all the way around her shoulders. Perhaps if she leaned in...

"Hey there, Jak!" it was Naem, coming to join them with a few scraps of dinner in hand. "Glad to see you found your friend." He plopped down on the ground and put his hand out to Marek. "You know, I don't think we properly met."

Jak fought down her annoyance and introduced Marek to Naem. Marek was very cool about it, not even pausing when he learned Naem's peculiar name.

"You did a good job today," Naem said to Jak. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you had a little Grace in you." He indicated his own brand of Grace.

"If I could go back in time, I would have taken Grace, or almost any other brand."

"Gifting is useful." Marek cut in. "We wouldn't have any of the brands if it weren't for the Gifters."

Jak frowned at him. So far he hadn't mentioned her brand. And he hadn't been so enthusiastic right after the Branding. But she shrugged it off and continued. "There was a time I would have given anything to be a Gifter. As a girl, I collected every scrap of knowledge that I could about them. I'd find any scrap of paper or parchment to copy the brands. I knew every line, every contour. I'd take sticks and draw them in the dirt."

"So what changed?" Naem asked.

Jak thought about that for a moment. "Back then I wasn't alone."

Naem nodded, understanding. The three of them sat there, watching the sun set and the stars appear. Jak liked it this way. Just



herself and her friends, not needing to say anything. Just being there. Eventually Marek excused himself, despite Jak's protests. She wanted him to stay, but Naem wasn't showing any signs of leaving, so perhaps it was for the best. They weren't going to have any more tender moments tonight. They sat in silence a while longer before Naem spoke again. "You know, the Fae are rumored to somehow have more than one stable brand."

Jak looked at him. She had never heard such rumors. "Really?"

"Well, there are conflicting reports. Some say they have no brands, but we have two very well-documented cases that say they saw a Fae use more than one power. So either they conceal their brands, or...."

"Or they're something completely different." Jak finished. Naem nodded, and she let that sink in. Even on demons, the brands were clearly visible. They often pulsed with light, as if in constant, flawed use. Many scholars theorized that a demon's brands constantly tried to function, but could not complete the use they were intended for, and that was what drove the demons mad. A second brand, or an incorrect brand could not complete its function, so it broke the human it was attached to. But if the Fae somehow had more than one power, and still maintained their ability to function, maybe that meant that Salizon's first constant, that a living being may only receive one brand, might not be as universal as everyone thought.

She simply *had* to find the Fae. Perhaps they would have some answers, something new that the scholars had never encountered. This new knowledge was fascinating, bringing her back to when she would scribble new knowledge in her journal as a little girl. And yet, something about that bothered her. Her academic side was something reserved for peaceful times, back when she thought nothing could harm her family. Back then, the only thing that had bothered her was the thought of what people would say when they found out that she wanted to be a Gifter. The thought seemed so trivial to her now.

Night set in, and eventually Naem left her there, walking to his tent. She stayed sitting down, looking westward in the direction they traveled, her arms wrapped around her knees as she pondered her journey thus far. In the moonlight, she could make out the faintest shadows of animals roaming the plains ahead of them. Probably domestic animals from a nearby farm. They had passed several such farms on their way here.

But the shadows started growing closer, and Jak could tell they were moving too fast to be cows or sheep. She got to her feet, concern now causing her to look closer.

And that was when the sound of a warning horn split the night. A horn reserved for one thing.

Demons.

Soldiers leapt from where they had been lounging. Spears and swords rose in their hands. They were trained for this and did not waste time. Though many had already retired for the night, they all slept with their weapons close at hand. Major Skellig, Kuldain's second, was already shouting orders. Jak had barely heard the horn and already Skellig looked prepared. One by one, the Watchers formed a wall against the shadows that grew steadily closer.

Jak raced to her tent, where she kept her father's spear. She had never actually trained with a full spear. Naem had only taught her the use of a quarterstaff so far. But she knew enough. A quarterstaff wouldn't do much against demons.

She quickly found what she was looking for, but by that time the demons had already closed the distance between them and the Watcher camp. As Jak turned to join them, the demons fell on the Watchers' waiting weapons.

It was a slaughter.

No demon had a chance against these well prepared warriors. Most were cut down the moment they approached a Watcher. For a moment, Jak could only stare in awe at the skill these warriors demonstrated. All of them. Telekinetics stopped the demons short of their goals, making them easy to eliminate. Flamedancers created a wall of flame in front of them, consuming every demon that entered. Even those without advanced combat-friendly brands seemed to have far more skill than Jak could ever dream of having. She looked down at her spear, wondering why she thought she was ready to wield it.

A few demons finally broke through the front line and came charging through the camp. A second, smaller group of Watchers were waiting for them. Marek was among them, as was Kuldain who looked as calm as if he were on an evening stroll. One lunged at him, but he calmly sidestepped and grabbed it by a leg. The demon howled in agonizing pain. Jak swallowed as she realized what was happening.

Kuldain was boiling the demon's blood.

The Watcher leader's hand blazed with white light, the Blood-

burner brand illuminated as it worked its magic. The demon kept howling and screaming with eerily human-like screams. But the sounds quickly faded as it died. Jak knew less about Blood-burning than any other brand, considering its taboo nature, but she knew it killed its victims with incredible speed. The brain would fry or the heart would implode within a matter of seconds.

Jak's eyes were so focused on Kuldain's Blood-burning, that she barely noticed a few other demons breaking the front line and charging at the other Watchers.

No, they weren't coming at the Watchers anymore. They slipped past the Watchers. Some fell as a Watcher got in a lucky strike, but the rest moved past the waiting soldiers.

And they were coming right for Jak.

She almost ran, but she planted her feet. She had to face these monsters that murdered her father. She could make it right. She had to make it right.

Instinct and several weeks of training took over. Her body formed a defensive stance, with the point of the spear angling toward the oncoming demons. They didn't even seem to notice the weapon. The first quickly impaled itself on the spear. Jak quickly realized the problem now. She struggled to get the spear free before the next demon lunged at her. Barely pulling the spear free, she used a technique Naem had taught her to use the shaft of the spear to redirect the demon's forward momentum away from her. Perhaps there was some use to training in the quarterstaff after all.

The demon fell to the side but quickly recovered. It sprang again at Jak, and it wasn't the only one. Three other demons were coming in her direction. She didn't even have time to notice that they were all focused on her, completely ignoring the other Watchers around them.

Without thinking her body fell into the appropriate stances to ward off the incoming demons. But it wasn't enough. There were just too many, and her experience with her weapon was still limited.

A demon barreled into her, knocking her down and snapping its pointed teeth as it did so. She barely held off its jaws, instinctively jamming the spear into the demon. The teeth stopped snapping and it fell off of her. But she was down now, and the remaining demons were moving in for the kill.

Suddenly, Kuldain was there. With skill Jak had never seen before, he managed to grab two of the approaching demons and Jak heard the sickening sizzle as their blood boiled. Other Watchers had arrived now, including Naem. That was the first time Jak had seen Naem join the battle. As she lay on her back, she watched the Watchers as they slaughtered the remaining demons.

That gave Jak time to get to her feet. But by the time she staggered

upright, the battle was practically done. It had happened so fast. All the demons that had come at her were dead, as were the rest that attacked the front line. Jak could hear demon cries cut off as the last stragglers were taken care of.

Silence finally greeted her, broken only by her heavy breathing.

Kuldain turned to look at her. "What was that?" he said. His voice was cold and darker than Jak had ever heard it.

"I..." Jak looked around. Kuldain wasn't the only one looking at her. The rest of the Watchers looked at her too. "I don't know what you mean."

"Don't be foolish. The demons, they targeted you. Specifically. Demons don't do that. They attack at random, like wild animals, worse than wild animals. It's the biggest advantage we have over demons, that there is no strategy. None! And yet, somehow, they wanted to kill you."

Jak looked around her, feeling every cold and confused stare. Even Naem was looking at her with confusion.

"I...I don't know why they attacked me," she said, starting to panic. "I don't know!"

Kuldain narrowed his eyes at her. But it was Naem that came to her rescue once again. "Sir, she was the smallest and least armored member of the band. Perhaps the demons sensed her helplessness and sought her out. To cull out the weakest of the band."

Jak let her head fall. She knew Naem was just trying to spare her some trouble, but being called weak still tore at her. Kuldain was pondering Naem's words. "And what does that say of you, soldier. You, whose job it was to make sure she was prepared for battle. Her liabilities weaken the band, and they are your responsibility."

That was unfair, and everyone knew it. Jak had only been training with the band for a matter of weeks. She couldn't be expected to match up on the level of soldiers whose lives were devoted to battle.

"Yes sir," Naem responded, saying nothing of the injustice of Kuldain's words. "I take full responsibility."

"Naem!" Jak exclaimed. She had to stop this. Naem caught her eyes and Jak could see the faintest shake of his head. A warning to stay out of it.

"Very well, soldier. You'll assist the cook with cleaning duty for the rest of the trip. And you will continue to train this...girl," he made the word sound like an insult, "so she doesn't put the rest of the band at risk. If this happens again, I'll send the both of you packing. Then we'll see how you do against a pack of demons alone. Especially if she continues to draw them out like she did."

"Yes, sir!" Naem looked uncaring, like Kuldain's punishment was nothing to him. Jak kept looking from Kuldain to Naem, wanting to

say something, but knowing she would only make it worse by doing so.

“Dismissed!” Kuldain turned away from Naem to the rest of the onlookers. “Get these bodies in a pile and burn them. Now!”

The rest of the Watchers sprang to action, never once hesitating to obey. All but Naem. He joined Jak, who could feel her knees start to shake as the adrenaline wore off.

He cracked a smile as he approached her. “So, if I’m keeping count, that’s now the third time that I’ve saved you.”

Jak punched his shoulder. She couldn’t handle his quips right now. “You didn’t have to do that for me.”

“Nah, cleaning duty is a minor annoyance. It could have been much worse.”

Jak didn’t ask him how it could have been worse. Instead, they began walking back to the tents.

“So, practice again tomorrow?” he said.

“What? After all this?”

“You heard the commander, I’m supposed to make you less useless.”

Jak knew he was just being playful. Under normal circumstances she would have punched him in the shoulder again. But he was right. She was useless.

Naem seemed to realize that his joke had gone too far. “Listen, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“No, it’s alright. Kuldain was right. If I’m no good to the band, what good am I?”

“Hey, you’ve only been with us for a few weeks. And frankly, no one has progressed as fast as you have in so short a time, not even the other new recruits, like your friends Marek and Estel. But you can’t be expected to be our equal just yet. We have years of training, and we have better br....” He broke off. But Jak knew what he had almost said, *‘we have better brands.’* Yeah, that much was true. Several weeks of training with Naem, and her brand could do nothing to help her. It was her biggest disadvantage. She didn’t even know how to use her Gifter brand. At least then, perhaps she could do something.

A thought occurred to her. Perhaps she could use Alchemy, branding objects like her mother used to do, something she could use in combat. It might give her an edge.

But she didn’t have time to think more on that. The camp was busy with cleaning up the mess of demons. She strode over to where the front line had been, Naem following behind her. It didn’t take long for him to figure out where Jak was going as she sought out the largest group of Watchers standing in a circle.

“Jak, I don’t think...”

She waved him off as she saw it. A body lay on the ground, covered in a thin cloth that hid its face. Jak came close and bent down, lifting the cloth. He was a young man that Jak had not known personally, but she recognized his face.

Tears began to well in Jak's eyes. More deaths. More failures. Not anymore.

"There's nothing you could have done," said Naem. "He did his duty."

"You saw the way the demons came at me. I don't know why, but I think they were attracted to me somehow. That means the attack was my fault."

"You shouldn't blame yourself for something out of your control."

"Maybe I'm tired of not having control. Maybe if I had more control, this man would still be alive. My father would still be alive."

"Maybe," said Naem. Jak turned to him, not expecting him to agree. "But the world turns with or without our help. Ultimately we have to understand where we can do the most good, and focus on that. That's why I joined the Watchers. Because..." he trailed off.

Jak paused. She had never heard Naem talk about why he was here, and didn't want him to stop talking. Curious, she asked, "Did something happen?"

Naem opened his mouth, then closed it again. Jak waited patiently until finally he seemed to reach some internal decision. "I was just a boy when my parents died," Naem said. "My father was a drunk, he often beat my mother and me. One day he went too far, and my mother didn't get up. I got away, but he killed himself before anyone could come to take him away."

"I'm...I'm sorry. I didn't know," said Jak.

"It was many years ago now. But that was when I learned that I did not have control over the actions of others. But I could control my own, and learn from others' mistakes. I've never touched a drop of alcohol. As soon as I was old enough, I enlisted with the Watchers. Kuldain sponsored my brand, and I've been with them ever since. We've saved a lot of lives, but we can't save everyone."

"How do you deal with the deaths?"

Naem shrugged. "I don't really. If I let myself think about it too much, it takes me over. And I can't let that happen. It keeps me from performing at my best, and that can only hurt others more."

Jak nodded. She understood that much at least. But she couldn't get rid of the feeling that she could have saved that soldier. She could have done something. At the very least, she could have left the camp and led the demons away.

But that brought up another issue. Why had the demons come for her in the first place? She wasn't anything special. The only thing that

set her apart from the others was her Gifter brand. But she had never heard of other Gifters being sought out by demons. Perhaps Naem was right that she presented a more vulnerable target. But something about that didn't seem right either. Demons usually weren't that smart.

*He fears you.* Her father's words returned to her. She didn't know how or why, but something told her those words had something to do with the demons.

She weighed her options. She could leave the camp, but that would only move the problem. If demons were targeting her specifically, then she was a liability no matter where she went. And she wasn't about ready to sacrifice herself. That would accomplish nothing, the demons would still remain a threat to mankind, and she would no longer exist to do anything about it. So her best option was to continue training with Naem, and hope that the demons didn't attack again.

She walked back toward her tent, passing Kuldain's command tent on her way. Naem followed her as his tent was in the same direction.

As she passed the tent, she overheard conversation inside. Kuldain talking to his lieutenants, most likely. But then Jak heard someone say her name. She wasn't even sure Kuldain remembered her name. She could get in trouble for eavesdropping, but it was still dark. She stopped and inclined her ear toward the tent, trying to listen in.

Naem stopped in confusion. "What are you doing?" he whispered.

Jak thought she heard the mention of 'Fae' come from within the tent.

"You go on ahead, I'll catch up later."

"You're not going to try and speak with the Captain, are you? Now is probably not the time."

"No, nothing like that. I just...I need some time to walk around camp and clear my head." It was a lame excuse but the only one she could think of in the moment.

Naem shrugged and continued to his tent.

Jak made to look like she was walking in the opposite direction, until she saw Naem turn a corner and go out of sight. Then she tiptoed as close as she could get to the back of Kuldain's tent without being seen.

She held her breath and listened hard.

“I still think you were too hard on the girl.” Skellig’s voice said

inside the tent. “You can’t possibly expect her to know everything after a few weeks. Besides, we had no way of knowing the demons would attack like they did.”

“Exactly!” That was Kuldain’s voice. “Demons *don’t* attack like they did. The last two attacks were some of the biggest we’ve ever seen. The packs are growing larger, and I want to know why. So far, the only connection is that girl.”

“Surely you don’t believe she is a....a....what exactly do you think she is?”

“I don’t know. There have always been rumors of demons who could think like men. The Fae are one such variety.”

Another voice spoke within the tent, one Jak didn’t recognize. “But the Fae aren’t as violent by all reports.”

“Let me tell you a story about these so-called non-violent Fae,” said Kuldain. Disdain dripped from every word. “Before we set out from Skyecliff, I was on assignment exploring north-west, where rumors of a new type of demon was said to have appeared. When I left, I was a Major General of the Watchers, leading an army of ten thousand. Only one person held more authority in the Watcher ranks. And do you know what happened when I returned, Major?”

Major Skellig didn’t say anything for a while. She seemed hesitant to embarrass the Colonel. “Everyone is aware, sir.”

“I came back alone, with only a handful of men I had managed to save. But they had lost their minds, and were as good as dead anyway. The rest died on those plains. I was demoted to the rank of Colonel and confined to Skyecliff for months, until we received this assignment to patrol the foothills. A tedious job.”

“Did the Fae kill your men?”

There was a pause that lasted so long, Jak wondered if Kuldain had heard the question. Then his voice came like gravel.

“Killing would have been a kindness.” Jak leaned in to hear as Kuldain began to elaborate.



“You’ve heard of the Fae in these mountains, Shadow Fae. The Fae my men and I discovered up north—well—they were a different breed.”

“A second classification of Fae?” Major Skellig’s question echoed Jak’s reaction. She had never heard of a second type of Fae, apart from the shadows that invested the mountains. “Or a third classification of demon.” Kuldain corrected. “I’ve long tried to convince my superiors that we’re dealing with a threat far more cunning than your typical mutated human. A threat that can think for itself. But no matter. These Fae were not dark like the Shadow Fae. They were bright, but sickly, like ghosts that lead little children off a cliff or to drown in the river. We arrived at a small mining town up north to stock up on our supplies, but these Bright Fae arrived first, and there was nothing we could do.”

Jak hung onto every word now. This was more information than she had ever heard about the Fae, and a new variety at that. She had all but forgotten Kuldain’s implication that she might also be connected to the Fae.

Kuldain’s voice lowered to a barely-audible growl. “These Fae, they have a way of getting into your head, make you see things. When we arrived, they had already led the villagers into a trap, a nest of demons not far from the mines. None of the villagers survived. We arrived mere hours after it happened, and the Fae were waiting for us. We killed as many as we could, but they got into our heads. Those they didn’t kill were driven mad. I, miraculously, survived with my wits intact. My brand somehow made me immune. I took the few remaining men with me, and we ran.”

“How is it that we haven’t heard about this until now?” Skellig asked. “Such a threat would require our foremost attention. It’s the Watcher’s mission to seek out and eliminate supernatural threats.”

“Once perhaps, no longer.” Kuldain responded. “I reported to High Command but all I received in return were deaf ears and a demotion. Honestly, I think I’m lucky that was all I received. There are worse fates.”

A pause hung in the air while Skellig and the other Watchers in the tent soaked in everything Kuldain had said. Jak’s thoughts were also racing. Just weeks ago she thought the kingdom was a safe place. Of course, she had heard of demon attacks, but those were isolated incidents, nothing on the scale of what Kuldain witnessed, or that Jak herself had witnessed for that matter. Could the Fae really be that dangerous? If so, why hadn’t anyone heard of that type of violence? Jak knew she was from a small town, but even they heard of what went on in the world via traveling merchants and Gifters. Their kingdom was not so large that no one knew what happened in its

corners. She needed to find out more.

Kuldain's voice spoke again, breaking Jak away from her thoughts. "Watcher High Command gave me this assignment, to patrol the space between Skyecliff and the Hollow Peaks. You, Major Skellig, and the rest of you, my officers, will serve as further witnesses of the threat we face."

"I'm not sure I understand," said Skellig.

"We are now entering Fae territory. As such, we must all be on our guard until we reach Foothold, at the base of the mountains. I was stationed there once, many years ago when the Shadow Fae first emerged. Once there, we'll take a day or two to rest, after which we will march into the mountains, to find the Fae."

"And then what?"

"And then we exterminate every last one of them."

Jak heard some nervous shuffling of feet inside the tent. Skellig voiced the apparent discomfort. "Sir, we're just a patrol, not an army. We don't know how many of them we might find. If they are as dangerous as you say, shouldn't we wait until we have a more sizable force?"

"Under normal circumstances, yes," Kuldain confirmed. "But these are not normal circumstances. Thankfully, I have it on good authority from my own experience and from eye witnesses at Foothold, that there are not many Fae in these mountains. Few have ever been seen, and the mountains could not possibly sustain so many."

"But...the legends."

"Are just that, legends. Stories that grow larger with each retelling. No, you needn't worry about their numbers. However, you are wise not to underestimate them. These Fae are cunning, they are like shadows. They don't attack until the perfect moment and possess certain skills of strategy and defense. They are not like the other Fae I encountered up north, what I call the Bright Fae. Not only are these darker in appearance, they will not openly attack you, but they are no less a threat. They will attack when you least expect it, usually at night when the shadows are darkest. I advise you to spread the word to your troops. They must be on their guard."

"They will be, sir," said Skellig.

"With any luck, we'll be able to eliminate one threat, leaving us free to focus on the remaining demons and the northern Fae."

"Yes sir. And if we can't find them?"

"We will. They are too bloodthirsty to stay reclusive for long. They will attack as soon as they feel their land is threatened. And we will be waiting for them."

A rustle of grass broke Jak away from the conversation. In the dimming light, she could see Estel walking in her direction. Had the

girl seen Jak eavesdropping?

Despite wanting to listen further, she moved away from the tent as quietly as she could, keeping low so as not to attract attention.

A few moments later, and she reached her tent. As she removed her armor, her thoughts raced over what she had just learned. There were more than one type of Fae, something she had never even thought to consider. Why hadn't her father ever told her something like that? Had he known, and could there even be more than two?

And what about the fact that they were entering Fae territory? Did that have something to do with the way the demons were behaving strangely, attacking Jak like they wanted to kill her, specifically? Jak couldn't see how, but she wouldn't discount any abnormality at this point. So much of what she thought she knew had changed in the last few weeks. She could only hope that the odd demon attack was a one-time thing.

As she lay on her cot in thought, she could feel her muscles stiffening from the fight, on top of her regular training and the march to Foothold. Slowly, she lifted herself from her cot and began massaging her muscles as best she could. Naem had shown her a few techniques, and she wished he were here now, not just because the man had magical hands when it came to relieving muscle tension. She needed someone to talk to.

A few moments later, and Jak lay back on the cot. Her mind continued racing as she took in the events of the day, and the conversation she overheard. The new information was almost enough to make her forget about Kuldain's harsh words to her. Everything she learned about the Fae captivated her. So far she had learned that there were more than one type of Fae, and that they had special abilities that might involve more than one brand, or no brand at all. What other secrets might they hold?

Carefully, she drew out her journal and recorded everything she learned that night, creating a new page for the new "Bright Fae" that Kuldain had mentioned and relabeling her first page on the Fae as "Shadow Fae."

Yet one thought persisted until she finally fell asleep. If the Shadow Fae were as dangerous as Kuldain seemed to think, was there any chance they would help her find her mother?

**I**t was still dark outside when Jak awoke. At first, she wasn't sure what had woken her. No sounds escaped the night and everything seemed calm in the camp. Confused, Jak looked around her tent, disoriented. Something had definitely awoken her. Had it been a sound?

She froze, and a chill ran up her spine. In her tent, not three feet away, was a pair of glowing, green eyes.

Jak swallowed. All she could see were the eyes. When she tried to see what the eyes were attached too, she could see nothing. The night was still dark, but surely she should be able to see something there, right?

Jak didn't move. She could not tear her gaze away from those green eyes. They held her fast in their hypnotic gaze. Should she be scared? She didn't feel like it. In many ways, this was similar to that night at the farm, when she had woken to feel a presence in the room. But this did not feel at all the same.

"Who are you?" she finally managed to ask.

The eyes...blinked. With that one motion, Jak thought she could discern the rest of the figure. It was a dark form, darker than the shadows around it. Black hair hung from its head, illuminated just barely by the pale gleam of its eyes. How had she not seen it before?

She felt herself relax further. If this creature, whatever it was, meant her immediate harm, it would have done something by now. But it stayed where it was, poised at the entrance to her tent.

Jak tried to think of what to do. Her first question had sparked a response, however minimal. Perhaps if she kept talking—

"My name is Jak," she said slowly. Did this creature even understand her language? The green-eyed shadow said nothing. "Do you understand?" Jak pointed to her mouth.

Jak wasn't sure if she imagined it, but she thought she saw the creature give the briefest nod. Or maybe it was the slight inclination of the eyes that Jak saw. Nevertheless, she had the distinct impression that this creature understood her. Well, that was good at least.

By now her fear was nearly gone. The creature didn't seem hostile, though it did still look physically unfriendly with its ominous eyes and shadowy body, which contrasted with its lack of aggression. Also, were those pointed ears? Jak suddenly realized what the creature must be, and her heart leapt with excitement.

"You're a Fae, aren't you? One of the Shadow Fae we've heard live in the mountains."

The creature stirred, though it did not speak. It rose, as if lifting itself to a full height. Maybe allowing Jak a more complete look? Jak took that as confirmation.

"Why are you here, in my tent?" Jak said, but before she could finish her words, a horn sounded. It wasn't the morning bugle, and Jak vaguely registered its meaning as important, but she was too focused on the Fae, for that was what it must be. It obviously wasn't a demon, but it wasn't human either. The Fae's green eyes left Jak for the first time and the figure twisted to listen to the sound. Then, without a word, it fled into the night. Its departing form hardly even disturbed the flap of her tent.

Jak quickly got to her feet and poked her head out from her tent to see where it had gone. But the creature either moved incredibly fast, or it blended in with the environment enough that she couldn't see where it fled.

But what she did see were soldiers emerging from their tents in a rush. That was when she remembered the horn that sounded moments ago. That was the warning of approaching demons, Jak realized. As she listened, she could hear faint howls. Those sounds didn't come from beasts. They came from human throats, mutated humans, demons. They were back for the second time in one night. How? Why?

"Jak!" a voice cried. Jak turned to see Naem sprinting toward her, still fastening his leather armor as he ran. "What are you waiting for, get in your armor!"

Jak did as ordered, barely even pausing to consider how sweet it was that Naem seemed concerned enough to check on her in a crisis like this. Of course, she could take care of herself, but it was nice to see he cared.

Time ran out quickly. By the time she had her armor fastened, grabbed her spear, and stepped outside, the demons had already reached the camp. She could see Watchers, in the distance, holding them off. Now why were the demons attacking again, just hours after the first attack? It didn't seem to fit with what Jak had learned about demon behavior. They rarely attacked unless provoked, or unless they were hunting for food. Why were two packs attacking the Watchers within a day?

Jak ran to the front lines. This time, she would help. She knew

enough to take down a demon or two. Perhaps some of the others would live for her efforts. Though she was already acutely aware that she was late in getting ready. She was sure Naem would chastise her about that later. If it weren't for the other Watchers holding the demons off, she might be dead right now.

As she ran, her eyes were so fixed on the approaching battle that she didn't even notice as a form launched itself at her from behind. She fell and hit her head on the ground. Bright lights exploded before her eyes, but they quickly faded to darkness as something else connected with her head. She didn't even have time to wonder what had hit her before she lost consciousness.

Jak woke to complete confusion. Her body bounced up and down

and it took her quite a while to get her bearings. When she finally realized where she was, she almost blacked out again.

She was riding on the back of a demon, its gray skin shining with sweat. Her body was tied to the beast, and tied hard. She tested the ropes binding her hands around the demon. No use. Oh, that stench was awful!

She looked around, spotting a half-dozen or so of the demons, their near-human bodies glistening in the dawn light as they kept pace with each other, running on all fours towards the mountains.

Jak's next thought was to wonder why the demons hadn't killed her already. And how had they managed to tie her to the demon's back? Jak's academic mind began racing with the implications. So much of what they thought they knew about demons could be wrong.

It didn't take long for Jak's thoughts to come back to reality. She was alive for now. She didn't know why, but she didn't want to find out. Whatever these demons had planned for her, it couldn't be good. But at least she was not dead. That was something.

But as the demons continued to run, Jak lost hope. She had no options. No matter how hard she tried to think of a way to escape, she could think of nothing. She couldn't untie the bonds, and she couldn't defeat the demons even if she did get loose. She had no weapons, with only her leather armor to protect her. She was going to need to find some way to get loose.

Hours passed by as the demons began their climb upward into the mountains. They zigzagged across the rising ground and eventually found a small pass to lead them deeper into the mountain range. From this high vantage point, Jak thought she could see a small tower in the distance behind them, if she craned her neck to get a good look. That must be Foothold.

As they continued on, Jak became aware of a few additional troubles. One, the ropes were beginning to chafe and it did not feel good. Two, the demons showed no signs of stopping, even though any

normal creature would have collapsed from exhaustion at this point. And three, the temperature was dropping.

Jak could feel her skin chill as they rose higher and higher. The demon seemed to radiate heat as it ran, so Jak managed to stay warm, but she still grew uncomfortable.

Several hours later, and the discomfort was beginning to turn into full-on pain. Plus there was the concern of food and water. The demons still kept up their pace, moving at a rate that no human or animal could achieve. Hopefully they would reach their destination, wherever that was, before Jak died of thirst.

She managed to lose herself in her thoughts to pass the time, unable to sleep, but trying her best to ignore the pain. Given her current helpless situation, she began to think through the events of the past few days.

Clearly, the demons had wanted her from the start, possibly even as far back as the attack on Riverbrook. But at the very least, they were after her the night before, which was why they had attacked her directly. And what did the Fae have to do with it? Jak didn't want to believe it, but she couldn't shake the suspicion that the Fae that had woken her earlier that day had something to do with her capture. It was too much of a coincidence that it appeared right before the demons took her. Though, it had fled at the sound of demons approaching.

She thought about Naem, who had probably noticed she was missing by now. Assuming he survived the demon attack. Jak's stomach lurched, and it wasn't because she was bouncing on the back of a demon. She very much hoped Naem was still alive. Marek too, especially Marek. He didn't have the same level of training that Naem had. She could only hope that the demon force was not too strong, or had left once she was captured. Why would they seek her out like this?

*He fears you*, her father had said. But who? And did this person have anything to do with the demons? It seemed too much of a coincidence. Perhaps there was some kind of...demon king? But why would such a person, or any person really, be afraid of Jak? She was nothing special. All she had was her Gifter brand and...

She paused. Of course! Why hadn't she thought of it sooner? She could use her magic to escape. Technically, Gifters who hadn't been trained were not allowed to use magic on living beings. But seeing as the demons were...well, already demons, Jak thought it couldn't hurt to experiment on them. Most people died if something went wrong with the branding. These demons were exceptions, but if Jak could give them another brand, perhaps that would be enough to overload their senses.



Jak's hands were already in contact with the demon's skin, so without another thought, Jak tried to summon her magic. She knew gifting was hard, but she also knew that no one outside the college of Skyeclass and other trained Gifters knew more about the power than she did. Her journal contained pages upon pages just about the use of the magic that she had pieced together from whatever book or scrap of information she could get her hands on. She wished she had that journal now, but she had memorized the basics.

The first step was to visualize the brand with as much detail as possible, and visualize the lines in a specific order, like you were drawing it in your mind. Getting the order wrong was often the biggest mistake that inexperienced Gifters made. She thought first about using a Flamedancer brand, but no, that wasn't a good idea. Flamedancer brands, when done poorly, were sometimes known to spontaneously combust the subject. And Jak didn't want the demon bursting into flames while she was attached.

She thought a moment longer. Eventually she settled on the Gifter brand itself. When a Gifter got that brand wrong, it almost always led to the death of the victim. To her knowledge, no demon had ever formed from a Gifter brand.

As she bounced on the back of the running demon, she did her best to clamp her hands around its waist, making sure her skin remained in contact with its belly. Then she closed her eyes and tried her best to concentrate. Visualizing the brand was the easy part. She had done this countless times before becoming a Gifter, back when the thought of traveling the world and bestowing gifts upon the young seemed like such an exciting prospect. Her perspective had changed, but she could still visualize a brand with ease.

The next part was tricky, and she only knew the theory. She was supposed to visualize the brand becoming part of the person she was touching, or in this case, the demon she was touching. Then, once she had that thought visualized with thorough detail, she would activate her brand. And that was another thing she only knew in theory. How, exactly, she activated her brand, she wasn't so sure. Did she just will it to happen, or say some magic words? In truth, she had never really found a good explanation in her books before.

Well, she had nothing to lose. Without another thought, she formed all the correct images in her mind, and tried to activate the brand.

Nothing. The demon kept on running like nothing had happened.

Jak tried again, doing her best to form the pattern of the Gifter brand in her mind, to imagine it becoming part of the demon, and to activate her brand. Still nothing. Was she visualizing the brand correctly? No, she had traced that brand countless times before. She

knew exactly the shape and the order that she needed to trace in her mind. So it must have something to do with activating her brand. If done properly, the dark lines of her brand should light up when activated.

She tried again, and again. But nothing seemed to work. She tried to think happy thoughts, having heard a rumor that this helped activate the brand. But that didn't seem to work. Or at least, she wasn't able to really dwell on any happy thoughts while strapped to a demon's back.

Try as she might, Jak could not activate the brand. Her concentration was so intense that she did not even notice the sun setting in the west until it was entirely dark. They had been traveling all day. By now, Jak had lost sight of the plains. Mountains seemed to rise on all sides, though the demons still ran in a specific direction.

Jak could still feel the pain in her body, and it was starting to distract her from using her magic. The ropes burning into her skin didn't help her concentrate. And her thirst was also growing. By now, she didn't really care where the demons were taking her. She'd take the danger if it only meant freedom from riding on the back of these hideous, foul-smelling demons.

Without warning, Jak heard a noise, like a fly buzzing past her ear. Her demon suddenly fell, its momentum sending it tumbling end over end. Jak cried out as she tumbled with it, feeling new pain as her back hit rocks, branches, snow, and whatever else was lying on the ground.

Finally, the demon lay still on its side, with Jak still strapped to its back. But before she could even register what had happened, she heard another sound and felt a brief pressure on the ropes that bound her to the demon, before that pressure disappeared entirely and Jak felt an enormous relief. Her ropes had been cut.

Carefully, she brought her hands around to inspect. They were red and swollen, but otherwise looked okay. She looked around but saw no one, so she tried to lift herself up. Immediately her body protested and she fell back to the earth. Every muscle screamed. So instead, she did her best to stretch each muscle before trying to use it again. Odd that her rescuers hadn't come to help her stand yet.

Once she had successfully lifted herself to her hands and knees, she looked around once more. And saw no one.

Just to be certain, she checked the ropes that had held her. A clear knife-cut showed where her hands had been. And on further inspection of the demon corpses around her, she found tiny darts embedded in their skin. Someone had definitely saved her, but where were they now?

A thought occurred to her, and she remembered the Fae she had seen before the demons took her. At first, it had almost appeared

invisible, save for its green eyes. Perhaps that Fae, or others of his kind, were responsible for her rescue? Perhaps they were here, right now, waiting.

“H-hello?” she called out to the open air. No response. “Thank you for rescuing me. I’m not sure what I would have done. I was trying to get my magic to work, but that wasn’t giving me any results. Hello?”

Still, she heard nothing back. Her eyes scanned the area around her. She was in a small clearing in the mountains. Large pines towered on one side, but most of the area was filled with snow-covered rocks. But no matter how hard she looked, she could find no trace of mysterious shadows or green eyes. The strangest thing was that she could find no footprints in the snow, other than those the demons made before they died.

“Um, can you explain to me why you would rescue me but then leave me here?” she said again to no response.

Without the demon’s body heat to keep her warm, Jak was beginning to feel the chill this far up in the mountains. If she didn’t find shelter or a way to stay warm, she would freeze to death.

“Okay, fine then,” she said aloud. “I’ll just do the rest myself.”

Jak did her best to stay calm and run through the survival skills

her father had taught her. First, she needed water. Well that wasn't much of a problem. There was snow everywhere. But eating snow would only cause her to freeze faster. She needed a fire.

She set about collecting dead wood that had fallen from the nearby pines. It didn't take her long to have a sizeable pile. But of course, she had no way to light it. The demons carried nothing, and she had no tools. Her father had taught her that she could start a fire by rubbing two sticks together, but she doubted that she could make that work, not when there was enough snow to dampen the kindling.

Maybe she could try her Gifter brand again? She nearly dismissed the idea the moment it came to mind. She'd had no success earlier, why would it work now? But the idea persisted. Perhaps now, with no demons to distract her...Of course, it was never a good idea to *intentionally* misuse a brand, but some brands were known to burst their subject into flame if not used correctly. That was why she hadn't tried the Flamedancer brand on the demon that carried her. But perhaps she could use it now.

Well she had nothing to lose. Choosing one of the larger branches, Jak sat and ran through the steps in her mind. She imagined the Flamedancer brand, as perfectly as she could. Then she willed her brand to activate, allowing the image to burn into the branch.

And of course, nothing happened.

Jak felt her spirits sink. This was her only option. She had to make it work. She couldn't rely on the help of anyone else anymore. Her options were use her brand or die.

She was *not* going to die.

Trying again, Jak reached inward, truly inward. She thought of all of her failures, all of the times that someone had come to her rescue, up to and including her recent, mysterious rescue by person or persons unknown. Jak was tired of it all. It was time for Jak to save Jak.

She thought she felt something, like a candlelight seen from miles away at the darkest hour of night. Even when far away, in the

darkness such a light was always visible. That was what she felt inside her. It was something distant, but it was light nonetheless, emerging out of the shadow of her soul. Even with all that darkness, she could see it. It was hope. Yes, she had failed over and over. She had failed her father, she had failed her friends, she had failed Naem and the Watchers. She had even failed herself. But she was not going to let it happen again. *I am not a failure!*

Instantly, the brand on her left hand flared to life. Jak gasped as it stung just a little, but her attention quickly moved to the branch. A pattern was beginning to form where Jak held it, a Flamedancer brand. The lines etched themselves in the order that Jak had imagined and willed it to be.

The glowing lines on the branch finished and darkened. And Jak's first brand lay before her, a perfect Flamedancer brand.

The stick, promptly, burst into flames.

Jak yelped and dropped the branch into the pile of wood she had gathered. She was almost disappointed, knowing she had made an unstable brand. But, this was what she wanted anyway, something to build a fire. And besides, she should be proud of herself. Some Gifters took months or even years before they could form their first brand.

She used some of the other wood to build a small tent around the burning branch. Within moments, a healthy fire began to keep out the chill. Jak knelt as close as she dared, feeling the warmth flow through her. Now she could eat some of the snow and still stay warm. She did so, feeling the relief as the cold water trickled down her throat. She still shivered as she consumed the snow, but the fire made all the difference. She spent the next few hours gathering wood, eating snow, and keeping close to the fire.

Now, it was time to find something to eat. Surely something lived this far into the mountains? She couldn't survive on tree bark. Perhaps she could find a rabbit hole or some edible plants.

It was almost night time, and she'd need food soon. Jak found a long stick, placed the end in the fire, and waited. Several minutes later she took the stick and began rubbing the tip against a rock. Soon the ash fell away and Jak was left with a pointed stick, sharpened by the rock. It wasn't much of a weapon, but it might help her catch something.

After adding more wood to the fire, she began to search the immediate area. There wasn't much there. With some effort, Jak managed to climb an incline and peer onto the other side. In the light of dusk she had to squint, but she eventually spotted a small animal in the distance, a rabbit from the looks of it.

Unfortunately, catching the rabbit with nothing but a sharp stick was no small task. Jak kept herself warm simply from the exertion. At

one point, she returned to her camp so the fire didn't go out. But after several hours of persistence, she eventually managed to follow the animal into its hole. From there, it didn't take too long to corner and kill the small animal.

Jak cheered. Her relief was palpable. Finally, she had caught something! Maybe she would live after all.

She arrived back at her makeshift camp just in time to add more wood to the fire. She used her sharp stick to skin and skewer the rabbit, silently thanking her father for teaching her how to do these things. At the time, she had been repulsed by the sight of a skinned animal. Now, she had never seen a more beautiful sight.

After roasting the rabbit, and smelling the sweet savor of cooked meat, she could feel her stomach growl from going more than a day without food. When at last the animal was thoroughly cooked, she tore off a piece and ate.

Truly, nothing had ever tasted so good.

Jak settled back down to finish the rabbit, eating every morsel she could glean off of its bones. She was quite proud of herself actually. Not only had she caught and cooked a meal in the wild, but she had formed her first brand, albeit a faulty one. Perhaps she could survive long enough to return to the Watchers.

What had made the difference that caused the brand to work? Jak wasn't sure. At first she thought it was simply her conviction, her determination. But that wasn't quite it. She had felt equally motivated while strapped to the back of the demon, more so even.

Her final thought before casting the brand had been, 'I am not a failure.' Maybe the brand depended on positive thoughts? But no, she had tried that before. She scanned through her mental process before activating her brand. Perhaps it was the hope she had felt, the thought that everything might work out in the end, that she was capable. In her mind, that truth had radiated within her. Truth. Perhaps that had something to do with it.

She would have to test her theories later.

As the worst of the hunger left, exhaustion decided to have its turn with her. All of that effort to survive was draining, and the warmth of the fire felt so soothing.

It didn't take long for her to doze off as the fire slowly began to die.



JAK AWOKE WITH A START. It was completely dark now. How long had she been asleep? An hour, two? Judging by the fact that she could

see no glow in the west, she must have been asleep for longer. And she was still exhausted, so what had awakened her so suddenly?

A growl from the shadows suddenly told her exactly why she was awake. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness she could vaguely make out the faint gleam of eyes watching her. Those eyes were neither human nor demon nor Fae. Jak swallowed. All of this, everything she had been through, only to be eaten by wolves.

Jak stood as the beasts circled her, and the fire had died to the embers. Her makeshift spear was all she had. But as the wolves circled around her, she realized that the stick would not be enough to hold them all back.

"Stay back," she said, realizing immediately that it would do no good. So she braced herself, waiting for the attack to begin. Within seconds, the bravest of the wolves decided to take its chance. It lunged at Jak, and she swung her stick to meet it. The pointy end found its mark. The wolf let out a howl as a sharp stick pierced its furry skin. But it was not dead yet, and Jak was barely able to extract the stick before another wolf pounced on her.

Her mind scrambled for options, but reflexes took over as the other wolf aimed for her throat. The beast barreled into her, and she fell to the snow-ridden ground. Using all the strength she had, she held the beast at bay with her stick. But it was all she could do. Desperately, she looked around for other options but could find none.

A familiar buzzing sound flew through the air. Each of the wolves let out a soft yelp, before each of them, together, fell to the earth. The beast atop Jak also fell, and she had to take a moment to push it off of her.

Whatever had just happened, it was the same rescuers that had saved her from the demons earlier. She could see the same, small poison dart buried in the fur of each wolf.

She was not going to let them get away this time.

"Hello!" she exclaimed. "I know you're here, I know you're trying to help me."

This time she saw something. In the darkness, she saw two pairs of glowing green eyes. She recognized those eyes. They were the same as the creature that had visited her in her tent just before the demons dragged her away.

They were Fae.

"Please help me," Jak said. "I need food and a place to rest." She swallowed, remembering the other reason why she wanted to talk to the Fae. Was now a good time? Well, she couldn't think of a better time, not when the Fae could possibly disappear at the moment's notice. She licked her lips. "I'm trying to find my mother."

The Fae said nothing in response. One seemed to look at the other,

their green eyes meeting before turning back to look at her.

Then one turned away, walked a few steps, and turned back to look at her. Were they telling her to follow? Jak voiced her question out loud. "You want me to come with you?"

She thought she saw the barest nod of the eyes, seeming to confirm her question. Okay then, what did she have to lose? It was follow the Fae or get eaten by wolves. Not exactly a hard choice to make.

So she followed, watching as the green eyes moved on then turned back to look at her. As the sun began to rise in the east, she could barely make out the shadowy forms of the Fae. From what she could tell, they looked human in shape, but their skin and clothing were dark, darker than anything she had ever seen, which blended in with their dark hair.

Where were they leading her? She wished she knew, but they wouldn't answer. Well, she didn't have much choice. Hopefully it wasn't anywhere dangerous. She could still remember those stories of Fae leading away young children. Yet, whatever she had heard, whatever Kuldain had said, these Fae didn't feel like a threat. Some might be scared of them, and they did look a bit intimidating. But Jak had a gut feeling, spurred by what her father had said of the Fae, that she was perfectly safe. Besides, they had plenty of opportunities to kill her, but none had made the move. And if they meant harm to her, why save her, twice?

What might have been an hour or so later, they arrived at a large cave. Both pairs of eyes turned to look at her, and they parted, as if inviting her to go inside. Jak swallowed, she was sure there was nothing to fear from these people, but that didn't mean she was fearless, especially when confronted with a dark, shadow-filled cave. But what could be in there? More Fae? Or maybe even...but no, she shouldn't get her hopes up that her mother was in there. That would be far too convenient. Her mother had been lost for years. She only came here to ask if the Fae knew where she had gone. And yet, perhaps the answer lay in this scary-looking cave. Swallowing, she took her first steps towards the scary blackness.

She took a few more steps, then a few more. She looked behind, but couldn't see the two Fae anymore. So she turned ahead, and kept walking, reaching her hands in front of her as the light dimmed from behind.

It seemed unnaturally dark inside this cave, even with the sun lighting its entrance. For all she could tell, there was no light behind her, even though she could turn around and see the sunlight, it seemed to fall away as she progressed through the cave.

Should she call out? Did the Fae realize that she had no way of navigating through the darkness? Perhaps they had some way of



seeing in the dark, and maybe they thought she did too.

Lost in her thoughts, she didn't notice the approaching eyes of several Fae. It wasn't until she was able to make out parts of the cave with the light from their eyes, that she realized that she was surrounded.

Only moments later, she felt cold hands grabbing her arms and face. One hand closed around her mouth so she could say nothing, and she felt herself lifted up.

She wanted to scream, but the hand on her mouth muffled her attempt. Had she been wrong about the Fae all along? Unable to do anything, she let them carry her deeper and deeper into the darkness.

Jak could no longer tell whether she had been in the cave for minutes or hours. The hands of the Shadow Fae continued to drag her down into ever-increasing darkness. All sense of time was lost.

“Where are you taking me?” Jak asked for the thousandth time, or at least what felt like the thousandth time. “Are you taking me to see my mother?” Was it her imagination, or did the Fae run faster at the mention of her mother?

Suddenly, they rounded a corner and stopped. With surprising gentility, Jak was set down onto a cold stone floor. Jak could see absolutely nothing, even with the pale green light of the Fae’s eyes. But then those too disappeared, and Jak was left to her own thoughts, which was not what she needed right now.

What were the Fae going to do now? Had she been wrong to trust them? What about food and water? And where was she anyway? Slowly, she began to feel around, trying to find anything that might help her. It wasn’t long before she found metal bars, outlining the edges of a cell. Jak swallowed. So she was a prisoner.

A faint rustling came from outside the cell, and Jak heard the clear sound of a metal door opening. Even in the darkness, Jak could tell that she was not alone. Someone had come to talk to her, or maybe that was wishful thinking. She still had no idea what these creatures wanted.

“Who are you?” A voice broke through the darkness, a female voice.

“H-hello? My name is Jak, who are you?”

“Jak.” The speaker tested the name on her tongue. Jak couldn’t tell if she was one of the Fae or not. Whoever she was, she did not seem to have the same green eyes, because Jak could see no evidence of any light coming from the speaker. All was pitch blackness.

“I don’t want to cause any trouble. I’m only here because demons dragged me into the mountains in the first place. I was just trying to survive.”

“Why would the demons drag you into the mountains?” said the

voice.

“How should I know,” said Jak. “I’ve never heard of demons acting that way. They either attack or leave you alone.”

The speaker seemed to think on that for a moment, saying nothing. Who was this woman? A fellow prisoner, or something else?

“Do you know why I’m here? Why did the Fae choose to drag me down here?”

A pause, and then, “So you know who they are?”

“Well they’re obviously not demons, or at least not demons in the traditional sense. I don’t know much about Shadow Fae, but everything I have heard would seem to match up. What do you know about them? How long have you been here with them?”

“I have been here a long time,” said the voice. “I know them well.”

Jak’s eyes squinted, looking again for any indication that the speaker had green eyes. Why would she have spent so much time with the Fae if she wasn’t one of them? “If you know them, can you tell me why I’m here?”

“The Fae have been watching you since before you came to the mountains. You have shown... unique qualities, and they don’t understand. They want to understand. You say you came looking for your mother?”

Jak hesitated. “Well yes, I mean I was just looking for information about her. And I didn’t expect to be up here in the mountains so soon, but I traveled with the Watchers so that I might find her. My father told me to find her.”

“What is your father’s name?” Her voice was calm, but the question was urgent.

“His name was Rael.” Jak waited for a response. She was not disappointed. The speaker took a deep breath, and let it out slowly.

“And where is he now?” she said.

Jak felt the pain well up inside her again. “I’m afraid he’s dead.”

The speaker let out a gasp, or something between a gasp and sob. A sneaking suspicion began to creep into Jak’s mind. Did she dare hope? “You knew my father?” she asked.

“Yes,” the speaker said, with sorry in her voice. “I knew him, a long time ago.”

Jak swallowed and felt her eyes start to glisten. She had to know for sure. “You haven’t told me your name yet. I’ve told you mine.”

She felt the other hesitate. “I’m not sure you would like it if I told you who I am.”

“Why would that make a difference?” Jak asked.

“Things are far more complicated than you realize.”

Jak felt a stab of annoyance. “For once, I wish people would stop treating me like a little girl. Whatever it is, I can handle it. I’ve

already survived three demon attacks, weeks of exhaustive training, living with a brand that I wish I could take back, the loss of my...father." Her voice cracked at the mention of her father. She didn't even realize she had been holding her emotions in, but they all came at her in a wave. Tears began to flow freely.

"My child," the woman's voice also seemed touched with emotion. "My name is Karlona."

Jak let out a breath she didn't know she had been holding in. Karlona. Her mother.

"Mother!" was all she could say. Desperately, she reached out into the darkness, trying to find the speaker, touch her, hold her, and be held by her. For a moment, she found nothing, and she almost panicked. She could feel her breathing coming in short bursts. Where was her mother? She needed to hold her!

But then, her mother found her.

Arms folded around Jak in a sweet embrace. Feeling her emotions come to a head, Jak began to sob. She had done it, she had found her mother. Karlona held her tight as Jak continued to shed tears of joy, mixed with tears of loss and relief. It was minutes before either of them spoke again.

Finally, the moment began to wear off, and questions jumped to the front of Jak's mind. But one question in particular, stood out in her mind. "Why did you leave?"

Her mother let out a long breath and held Jak tighter. She had clearly known this was coming. "I'm sorry, Jak, I would never have left you and your father if it wasn't absolutely necessary."

"Why was it necessary?" Jak didn't doubt her mother's words, not exactly. But she couldn't think of an acceptable reason why any mother would leave her child alone for sixteen years.

"Not long before you were born, I went on an expedition with some fellow scholars. We were trying to find a Pillar of Eternity."

Jak leaned in, intrigued. She had heard of the Pillars of Eternity, supposedly the most powerful of the Holy Relics.

"We were a group of scholars, though I was the only one who lived outside of Skyecliff. They recruited me as one of the foremost experts in alchemy."

Jak got excited. She always wondered where she got her scholarly side from. It certainly wasn't her father. "I'm a scholar too!" she exclaimed. "At least, I'm going to be. I've learned everything I can about brands."

Jak couldn't see her mother smile, but she thought she could feel the approval coming from her embrace. "That's wonderful, child," she said.

"So did you find one? A Pillar of Eternity I mean."

“No, not exactly. We found something else. I was able to use some personal Relics that I had made to track nearby sources of power. We had heard rumors of something buried in these mountains, near Foothold where your father was stationed.”

Jak almost interrupted again. She had no idea that her father had lived at Foothold, the very place where the Watchers had been traveling. She wondered idly if they were there now. Was Naem enjoying a hot bath and an actual bed?

Karlona continued, “It wasn’t long before we caught the trace of something with powerful magic. Far more powerful than any Relic I’ve seen before. We thought it must have been a Pillar of Eternity.”

“But it wasn’t?” Jak asked.

“No, it was a book.”

Jak paused, confused. She had never heard of a Holy Relic in the form of a book. She supposed it was possible, but...

“It was an original copy of the Annals of Adam.”

Jak slipped from her mother’s embrace and she had to catch herself on the cold stone floor.

“An original copy?” she repeated. The Annals of Adam were the most sacred text they had, but all original copies had been lost. She had heard that Skyecliff carried some of the oldest versions, dating back several centuries, but even they were not originals.

“Yes, hidden in the caves here for hundreds of years. It was a discovery beyond our wildest dreams. Second only to finding a Pillar of Eternity, nothing could have surpassed this.”

Jak felt more questions arise. Something still didn’t make sense.

“So why didn’t you bring it back? Did the Fae keep you here? And what does this have to do with your leaving?”

“Jak, it’s difficult to explain. This is what I didn’t want to tell you straight away.”

“What is it?”

“The book, it holds a power of its own. That was what drew us to it. But it also...changed us.”

A cold dread began to well up in Jak’s stomach. “Changed you, how?”

For a moment, Karlona didn’t answer. Then two slits of green light opened and illuminated the room. To Jak’s eyes, that had become used to the dark, the light filled the entire cell.

No, she thought. *No, no, no, no!*

The light emanated from the eyes of a Shadow Fae. One that held Jak in her arms. It must have kept its eyes closed this entire time to keep the green light from giving it away.

Jak left the Fae’s embrace and scrambled away as fast as she could. Her back felt the cold sting of metal bars as she reached the back of

the cell.

“Jak! I...please listen.” The expression on the Fae’s face was contorted and fearful. “I can explain everything.”

“How can you be my mother?” The question was almost a whisper, and Jak didn’t realize she had said it aloud until the Fae responded.

“I *am* your mother, Jak.” Her voice was strained with emotion. “Please, you have to believe me. The book, the Relic, it changed all of us. We became the first Fae. We wanted to come back but didn’t know if society would welcome us. Or if they would mistake us for demons.”

Jak narrowed her eyes. Perhaps they were demons, like Kuldain always said. Perhaps the Fae were just some other breed of demon, created from tampering with magic, with a Relic. But she listened as her mother continued.

“I gave birth to you in this very cave. And when we realized that you weren’t like us, not completely anyway, we decided to take you back to your father. At the time, we didn’t understand our transformation and we...I thought it better that you were raised in normal society, away from us.”

She paused, as if giving Jak a moment to say something. But Jak didn’t know what to think yet, so she stayed silent. Everything the Fae said seemed to make sense, to some degree. But she couldn’t quite bring herself to believe it yet. Her father had never said anything about what happened when her mother disappeared, or how he had come into possession of Jak as a baby. Why hadn’t he said anything? She’d always thought that her mother had disappeared after she was born.

“I brought you to your father, who was out looking for our lost expedition. We met him and his band near the base of the mountain. It...did not end well. ”

“And what did my father do?” Jak asked.

“He managed to calm the situation. He seemed to be the only one who believed that we were not demons. He took you and agreed to raise you. That was the last I ever saw of him.”

“So are you?” Jak asked.

“Am I what?”

“Are the Fae demons? Like everybody says. Some people would think you look like demons.”

“No, we’re not.”

“And why should I believe you?” This was all too much for Jak. How could her father have kept a secret from her like this? Why hadn’t her mother come looking for her? They could blend in with the environment it seemed. She could have come. She could have. Turning, she faced her mother’s eyes. “You, who left my father alone with a child to care for. Who never came back to even check up on

her own daughter.”

“I did it to protect you.” Karlona’s voice pleaded, but Jak would have none of it. Her anger was speaking now.

“Don’t give me that! You have no idea how much he sacrificed for me. How much he struggled to be a shepherd and a single parent. It almost broke him!”

“I know, I’m sorry. But if anyone had discovered you were the daughter of someone like me...”

“Oh, right, so you had all my best interests at heart?”

Karlona’s eyes narrowed, dimming the light. When she spoke, her voice was cold.

“Perhaps it is best if we come back to this later.”

Jak secretly agreed, though she was still angry. “Fine!” was all she said.

The green eyes rose as Karlona stood. Without another word, she exited the cell and Jak was left to herself in the dark. She instantly regretted her temper.

Why had she acted up like that? Was it simply the revelation that her mother was a Fae? Jak tried to sort through the emotions that were leaving her confused and dazed. But for now, she couldn’t make sense of them. She couldn’t make sense of any of it.

Her mother was a Fae, the Fae were evil, or at least that was what she had been led to believe. But what evidence was there that the Fae held any ill-will towards humanity? After all, if Karlona was to be believed, they had been a simple band of explorers and scholars. But Jak instantly knew that this wouldn’t help their case. After all, demons used to be human too. It was the misuse of magic that led to their transformation. Was it the same for her mother?

Questions upon questions plagued Jak as she sat in the dark. She couldn’t sleep. Instead, she wrapped her arms around her knees and did her best to sort it all out. The tears were a welcome release.

Jak wanted to be angry, she had every right to be angry. But she could not hold that anger for long. In the darkness there was nothing, no sound, no light, nothing to fuel her anger except her own thoughts. And as time dragged on, the rational side of her brain quickly began to take over.

Add to that the fact that she was now hungry and thirsty. She wondered if the Shadow Fae drank water like normal humans. Should she say something? Were they even here? There was absolutely no indication that someone was watching her. At times, she thought she saw a flicker of green light illuminate the cell, or hear the slightest whisper. But overall it didn't matter. She was alone.

A blinding light suddenly caused Jak to shield her eyes. It seemed to fill every corner of the room. It took a few moments for her to realize that the light came from a single torch, lit in the doorway to the room they were keeping her in. Her vision had grown so used to the darkness, that even this single torch brought pain to her eyes. It took a few moments to adjust.

When she could finally look around, she could see shadows lining the walls. Shadow Fae. They were still watching her. But at least she could get a good look at the room she was in now. Her cell appeared to be built into a corner of the cave itself. Metal bars protruded from natural rock, enclosing the small space. She had guessed as much from feeling around the rough floor.

What surprised her was how big the cave seemed outside her small, stone room. It rose up some fifty feet or so, and she couldn't quite make out how far it stretched in front of her. A small ledge ran by her enclosure, but then dropped off into a much wider chasm. Her room seemed to be one of many strung along the ledge, though she couldn't quite tell from inside. Her single torch was not enough to illuminate beyond the ledge itself, though from what she could tell, the space out there could be enough to fit the entire town of Riverbrook.

"I'm sorry for surprising you like that," a voice spoke. It was the



Fae who claimed to be Jak's mother. Jak still resisted the thought that her mother could be so...non-human. She wanted to believe, and if the Fae's story was true, it would make some sense. Perhaps she could give them the benefit of the doubt. At least for now.

Karlona was accompanied by at least two other Fae, who stood behind her. Watchful. Karlona spoke again. "I've often thought about what I would say to you if I had a chance. But these things rarely go the way we plan. I'm sorry we kept you here like this. You're free to go as soon as you wish."

The doors to the cell creaked as the other two Fae stepped forward to open it, and Karlona stood there expectantly. Jak didn't say anything at first. She was having an internal struggle in her head. Should she trust this Fae?

"People fear you," she said finally. "Out there in the real world. We hear nothing but rumors about the Fae, and none of them are good. They all speak of children snatched up when they wandered too far from their homes, or travelers lost in the mountain passes."

Karlona sniffed. "Rumors, as always, seriously misrepresent the truth. We have hurt no one, not since..." she broke off. "Not since the time I gave you to your father. That said, sometimes travelers have touched the magic of the book and become one of us. Some of them try to return, but we forbid it. To the outside world, those people are then lost."

"So you're saying that you're not the only ones who became Fae?" Jak asked. This was not something she had considered before. She assumed that her mother and her companions were the only Fae.

"Our numbers grow with each passing winter, albeit slowly," her mother replied. "We're still not sure what causes it. Some change, but many do not."

"And this is all because of your relic, the Annals of Adam?"

Karlona nodded. "We don't yet know how or why, but yes. We're certain the book has something to do with the change."

"So why don't you lock up the book then? If it's changing people like you say, disrupting the lives of passing travelers, shouldn't it be contained?"

Karlona shook her head. "We tried that. But the power reaches beyond any containment that we have the power to impose. As it is, we do the least amount of damage by keeping it here, locked up in the mountains and away from as many people as possible."

"May...may I see it?" Jak realized the moment she said this that she wanted little else. To see a Holy Relic, and a lost original copy of the Annals of Adam at that. The Relics were the highest form of Holiness in the Royal Church at Skyeclass, and the Annals of Adam their most precious scriptures. To see something that was both a Relic

and an original copy of the Annals...well there could be nothing else like it.

The little girl inside her, the one who hadn't been beaten down by the death of her father and everything else that had happened since, felt exhilaration at the prospect of actually touching something so powerful.

Karlona considered her, green eyes narrowing in thought. "You are not worried that it will turn you into one of us?"

"You said people just wander past the mountains and turn into Fae, right, but not everyone. Wouldn't I have begun to change by now?"

"Perhaps, but we don't often let others outside of our inner circle see the book."

Jak opened her mouth to protest, but Karlona cut her off. "Don't worry child, I think we can make a special case for you." One of the other Fae stepped forward to whisper something in Karlona's ear. She bent to listen but waved him off within seconds, whispering something Jak could not hear.

Turning back to Jak, she said, "Not everyone agrees with me on this." She shot a look back at her companion. "But I think you need to see what we're dealing with. It could be important."

"What do you mean?" Jak asked.

"We've long talked about how we should reveal ourselves to the outside world, to prove our innocence and alleviate fears. Given our... different appearance, we weren't sure how we could do that. But perhaps with a little outside endorsement..."

Jak slowly connected her emotions in her head. "I...will need to know more, but...from what I've seen, you aren't a threat, not like the demons that people think you to be. I will vouch for you. I don't think people would listen to me, but I'm willing to try."

Jak could barely make out a smile touching Karlona's lips. The type of smile a mother gives, proud of her daughter. Jak realized that she already saw this woman as her mother. Somewhere, deep inside her, she trusted the Fae. If not, it was certainly an over-complicated ruse. This woman wouldn't intentionally deceive her like that, right? She knew too much about her father to be lying completely.

Of course, the Fae did have an appearance that most might find disconcerting. Jak had heard of travelers from the south with darker skin, but not the shade of pure charcoal that she saw among these people. And the way they seemed to...bend shadows around them, it would make most people hesitate, and probably strike fear into many. But Rael's comforting words still echoed in the back of Jak's mind. He always insisted that the Fae were nothing to fear. So she would press forward, and trust that her father knew what he was speaking of.

“I will take you to it,” her mother’s voice brought Jak out of her thoughts. “You may take the torch to guide you. We have no need of light to see, but it does not hurt our eyes any more than yours.”

Jak nodded and stepped forward to retrieve the torch. As she left her room, its flickering light illuminated the path that ran alongside the enclosure. The cavern beyond was still too large for the torch to fully illuminate, and Jak quickly found herself taking a safe step away from the edge of the path. That drop must be at least fifty feet. But peering over the edge, she caught a glimpse of structures far below. She could see movement down there, and pinpricks of green light flashed up at her, eyes of Fae staring up at her torchlight. There were many Fae below. But Jak couldn’t see much more than that.

She turned to find her mother, who was waiting expectantly to one side. She lifted a hand in one direction, indicating where they should go. Then she began moving away.

Jak took a few hasty steps forward to follow, knowing from experience how easy it was to lose sight of a Shadow Fae. She managed to keep pace with her mother as they wound through complex corridors and caverns. Some were large, like the one where she had been kept. Others were narrow, some so much so that Jak had to turn sideways to move on.

Curious, Jak fell in line with the other two Fae. “I don’t see many of you here. Is everyone hiding?”

The two stayed silent. “Come on, can’t you at least say something? I’m Jak, what is your name?”

Still they stayed silent, though Jak could see one glance at the other, as if asking permission to speak.

“Weren’t you two the ones that helped me out on the mountain?” It was a wild guess, but an educated one. Jak thought she saw something familiar in their eyes.

“Those two are Vander and Neril, they don’t talk to strangers much,” said Karlona ahead of them.

One of the Fae grimaced. “And Karlona is too quick to trust,” he said to Jak. “As, apparently are you.”

Karlona waved a hand in dismissal, but Jak probed further. “Don’t you want me to trust you?”

“I’d prefer it if we didn’t have the need to trust anyone at all. We do fine here by ourselves.”

Jak let the conversation die for a moment, then spoke up again, “So...are you Vander or Neril?”

A pause, then, “I’m Vander, he’s Neril.” He pointed to the Fae on the other side of Jak. Neril had yet to say a word, but his eyes looked kinder than Vander’s, and Jak thought she caught the hint of a smile and nod as she looked at him.

“Well it’s a pleasure to meet you. I know you might not want to trust me, but I’m going to do what I can to make sure the others will trust you.”

Vander grunted, but that was about as good as Jak could expect. The more she talked with these people, the more they felt like normal human beings.

After what seemed like several hours of winding through endless passageways, always going downward, they arrived at a carved stone door. Jak paused to examine the door. It seemed old, certainly not something the Fae had built. She had caught a few glimpses of Fae structures, but this doorway had a completely different style to it. She wished, not for the first time, that she had her journal with her. This needed documentation.

“This is where we found the book, through this door. It took us weeks to find it. We had to be careful not to get lost in these caves.” Karlona waved a hand, indicating to Jak that she could enter.

Jak took a tentative step forward, and swallowed. Did she feel a slight humming coming from the archway? She knew she probably would have changed by now, but how could she be sure? Did it take longer for some people? Maybe she was in the process of changing and it was too slow for her to notice. And though her mother and the others seemed okay, how could she be absolutely sure that becoming a Shadow Fae was a good thing?

Her mother seemed to sense Jak’s uneasiness. “Don’t worry. It does not change everyone, and it’s likely that you would have transformed by now, if it were to happen. Besides, in one sense you’re already half Fae. Perhaps that is enough to keep the transition from completing itself.”

Jak nodded, then stepped forward, through the stone archway. On the other side, she could make out a large cavern, narrow on the sides, but stretching far above her head. The walls were flat, unlike most of the caves she’d seen before. It seemed someone had carved out this chamber. It seemed more like a throne room than a natural cave.

At the far end, sitting on a raised pedestal, was the book. At first, it looked like any ordinary book. But as Jak drew nearer, she could recognize its ancient markings and elaborate designs across the cover. And there was something else too. A power radiated from this book, the humming she had felt earlier, a feeling Jak couldn’t quite identify. But she could recognize its potential. For the first time in her life, she stood near a Holy Relic.

On the walls, Jak spied metal hooks to hold her torch. She quickly placed it in one of the hooks and turned back to regard the Annals of Adam. The designs seemed to move in the fire light.

Reaching forward, she touched the cover and ran her hands along

its surface. Then, gathering her courage, she opened the book.

She glanced at the first page. "Behold the Annals of Adam, first man, that he wrote to his sons and daughters in the final years of his reign." Wait a moment, Jak realized suddenly that she understood everything that she read. Shouldn't this be in an ancient language? Was the book written in her language or was some power allowing for understanding?

Jak kept reading. The first pages outlined the story of Adam and how he and his wife first came from the stars to populate the planet. The first parents.

Karlona walked up behind Jak as she began flipping through pages. After a moment she spoke, "One of the first things we noticed is that this copy of the Annals isn't quite like the copies we have today. In other copies of the book, some of the language has been changed to a more modern tongue. But in some cases, whole passages have been taken out. We're not sure why. This original copy seems to be more complete."

"Which parts were removed?" Jak asked. She'd be interested to see those first, as she already had a basic understanding of the rest of the book. The Lord Mayor of Riverbrook would often read it to them at town gatherings.

Karlona reached out a hand and flipped over a few pages. "This passage right here might be of particular interest to you."

Jak read the prescribed section and her eyes widened as she did. She read it a second time to be sure. "This...this talks about you!" she said aloud. "Beneath the flesh of mankind is hidden a duplicity of light and dark, a power to manifest itself in the morning of time, to change man into a creature of shadow and light."

"Yes, we thought that was interesting as well. It goes on to talk about other powers that lie dormant in mankind. And it's not just talking about brands. Some of those are outlined later on. It's talking about something deeper. Something buried in our very flesh. We think that is why we turned into Shadow Fae. The power of this Relic somehow activated something already within us."

Jak was scanning ahead, looking for other clues. "This won't convince everyone though. It's still pretty vague. And people could argue that you added this passage to make it seem like you belong."

Karlona nodded. "We know, or we would have come out with this a long time ago. Still, any scholar will be able to tell that this book is authentic. Those who matter will believe."

"What does it mean, 'creatures of shadow and light'?" Jak asked suddenly. "The Fae only seem to represent Shadow from what I've seen. Do you have some magical abilities I haven't seen yet?"

"Oh we have many abilities you haven't seen, but nothing to do

with light. Only the absence of light. Perhaps that's what the passage means, but we believe it refers to something else."

"What do you mean?" Jak asked.

"We think there are others like us, but different. Other Fae with different abilities."

"Of course!" Jak thought out loud. "That's what Kuldain was talking about when I overheard him in his tent."

"Kuldain?" her mother asked sharply, "With the Watchers?"

"Yeah, do you know him?"

"I knew him," her mother said flatly. "What did he say?"

"He said he came across a group of them, that they had slaughtered a whole village, and he killed as many of them as he could, but not before they killed the rest of his band. He was demoted because of it."

"You're sure they were Fae and not demons?"

"No, the way he described them was as beings of light, though he saw them as a sickly green sort of light, kind of like your eyes..." Jak cut off. "I mean, I'm sorry, I didn't..."

"It's okay, they take some getting used to I suppose," her mother said. "Though you'd think the rest of our appearance would be the first thing that bothers people. Or what we can do."

"So just what can you do?" Jak asked, curious. "All I've managed to see is the way you seem to disappear."

"Well, we can increase the darkness around us and other shadow-related abilities like that. It's not really that interesting to be honest."

"Are you kidding? That's amazing! You've essentially found a way to have more than one power, something that everyone thought was impossible! The demons have more than one brand, but that turns them savage. Somehow you managed to maintain your sanity. And I've never heard of brands that can do what you describe. How do you do it?"

"We don't have brands," her mother answered.

Jak blinked. "What?" she asked. Perhaps she had misheard.

"We don't have brands," her mother said again. "It's one of the first things we noticed as we changed. The brands we had faded. I used to be a Gifter like you, but I lost that power the moment I became a Fae. The same happened to all the others."

"But your other abilities..."

"They became an instinctive part of us. It took some getting used to at first, but we all naturally understood the nature of our change and what we could do, even though we had no idea how that change happened in the first place."

"You said it came from proximity to the book, something to do with its magical ability."

“Yes, but we have no idea how or why that change occurred. Why would the book do that to us? Why would it affect some and not others? Our coming was foretold in its pages, but so was the coming of other races, other Fae. Why are we only limited to beings of Shadow? These are some of the questions we still struggle with.”

Jak nodded, trying to take it all in. She hoped more than ever that Naem had found and kept her journal. This was so much more than she ever expected to learn in so short a time. Just a few weeks ago she had been eager to learn how to be a Gifter from the college in Skyecliff. Now she had not only performed her first branding (albeit badly), but she was starting to think that everything she ever knew about magic was only the beginning. There was so much she still didn't know.

A thought occurred to her. Maybe her mother could answer some of her other questions.

“Father, just before he died. He...he told me to find you, but also...” She paused. Talking about her father was hard, especially to her mother, someone she had never known.

“Go on,” her mother prompted.

“He said that someone fears me. I wasn't sure what he meant. I've wondered if he didn't know what he was saying.”

Karlona frowned in thought. “No, I don't think so. I'm not sure who he was talking about, but there is something special about you, Jak. I recognized it the moment I saw you. Perhaps it has something to do with my change into a Fae just before I gave birth to you. And there are powers out there that we have yet to encounter. Perhaps Rael knew something we didn't”.

Another Fae Jak didn't recognize rushed through the archway at that moment and whispered something in Karlona's ear. She spoke with him for a moment in hushed but urgent voices. Turning back to Jak, she said, “Your friends are here to rescue you, it seems.”

Jak felt disbelief and joy swell through her, “Naem? He came for me?” How had he managed to convince Kuldain to let him follow her trail?

“Not one man, an entire band of Watchers.”

Jak frowned. That didn't make any sense. Why would they all come for her? They had other obligations, and she had been warned that they would not stop for her.

Her mother saw the confusion on her face. “We don't think they're just here for you. They're here for us. They've taken one of us hostage, not an easy thing to do I might add.”

Jak swallowed. “Yes, that makes sense.” It was falling into place now. Kuldain hadn't come because he was interested in rescuing her. He came because it was an excuse to find the Fae. “Their leader

doesn't think highly of you. He planned to find and kill as many of you as he could. It makes little sense to me because you're peaceful. You've done nothing to harm them, or me."

"They don't know that. For all they know, we dragged you off and ate you alive."

Jak glanced at her sideways. Her mother shrugged, "I told you the rumors get out of hand."

"So what are we going to do?" Jak asked.

"Well they can't trap us here. These caves have openings all over the mountains. There's no way they can block off our escape. And there are others of our kind scattered throughout the Hollow Peaks that we can ask for help if we need it. But reaching out to them will take time. Time we don't have. They have one of our own, and we won't leave him behind."

"Can't we just give them me?" Jak asked. "Perhaps if I rejoin them, they'll give up your man. Like a hostage exchange. Which, I realize I'm not a hostage," she added quickly. "I just mean they will think of it that way. This will show them you're good people."

Karlona didn't look convinced. "I don't know. It might work, but I have a feeling that your Kuldain has other motives for being here. He's the one that personally took our man hostage. But we can't overpower them as we are, not without calling for help. For now, I think you're right. It's our only real option."

Jak nodded. She could do this. Once she negotiated the release of captured Shadow Fae, she could explain the whole situation to the Watchers, about what she had learned concerning the Fae and how they had treated her. And perhaps convince them to let the Fae live.

"I'm ready," she said, sounding far more confident than she felt.



**I**t took a long time for them to retrace their steps. This time they were climbing upward, and Jak's breathing came hard after enough climbing. Eventually, however, she saw a light in the distance. A white light, separate from that of the torch in her hand. And she thought she could here something as well.

Her mother paused in front of her, and Jak stopped herself from walking right into the Fae. Jak could see many Fae now, lining the walls, looking expectantly at Karlona. Apparently her mother was a bit of an authority figure among these Fae. One of them stood close to Karlona and whispered an update. When he had finished, Karlona turned to Jak.

"Kuldain is outside with the band of Watchers. He has our man at knifepoint, and is calling out for you. Are you sure you want to go out there?"

Jak swallowed and clutched at her arms, but stood firm. "Yes, I have to help."

"You understand that this is a delicate situation. Any wrong move."

"I know." Jak's rolling stomach was not letting her forget it.

"We're really trusting Urmen's fate to a child with no training in negotiation?" It was Vander, the Fae Jak had tried to strike up a conversation with earlier.

"You think they would rather deal with us?" Karlona shot back, her eyes flashing. "When it was this girl that they came to rescue."

Vander scoffed. "Perhaps they used her as an excuse, but we all know Kuldain was there at the beginning. He knows what happened to us. It's too much of a coincidence that he is here now."

This was news to Jak. "Wait, you're saying that Kuldain met you here before?"

Karlona spared a glance for her. "Yes, he was there when we first encountered the Watchers and your father took you from us. That means he also witnessed the death of his commander at our hand." She shot Vander a look that suggested it was all his fault.

That changed everything. Perhaps it explained why Kuldain held such a grudge against the Fae. But why would he keep this part of his story a secret? He was open about the Bright Fae he'd encountered in the north, but never said that he knew the Shadow Fae. It certainly complicated matters.

Jak thought she heard Kuldain's voice coming from the cave opening in the distance, and it brought her back to reality. "We've got to do something though. I'm willing to help if you'll let me."

Karlona glanced at Vander, who merely frowned and looked away. "We don't have any other choice." Karlona said, her voice raised just enough so that the rest of the Shadow Fae could hear. Then she nodded at Jak.

Jak returned the nod, then began taking several steps forward, her eyes fixed on the growing light of the cave entrance ahead of her. She wasn't going alone. Several of the Fae ran ahead, vanishing completely as they drew closer to the light.

"SHOW YOURSELVES!" she could hear Kuldain yelling ahead of her now. "I KNOW YOU'RE LISTENING. GIVE US THE GIRL AND WE WILL LEAVE YOU BE."



KULDAIN HELD the captured Fae in his grasp, with a knife held to the creature's throat. "SHOW YOURSELVES!" he yelled for what felt like the hundredth time. "I KNOW YOU'RE LISTENING. GIVE US THE GIRL AND WE..." the voice cut off. Ahead of her, Jak could see the faint shadows that suggested the Fae had revealed themselves. She quickened her pace to join them before Kuldain or any of the Watchers did anything rash.

As she approached, the Shadow Fae parted for her, and she emerged from the cave to see dozens of Watchers, perhaps even the entire band ahead of her. They all held tightly to their weapons, and several had glowing hands as their brands activated, ready for a fight. She saw Naem and Marek at the front of the ranks, their faces a wash of concern. She let out a breath. Thank goodness they were alright.

But she didn't have much time to dwell on her friends. Her eyes moved to Kuldain, who stood in front of everyone, holding the captive Shadow Fae in one arm, with a knife at his throat.

Swallowing, she walked straight towards Kuldain, trying her best to hold her head high. Several Watchers looked at her confused. No doubt they thought she had been the victim here. Well, now was a good time to let them all know that the Fae were not their enemies.

Jak stopped several feet from where Kuldain stood holding the

captured Fae. "I'm here, now let him go."

Kuldain hesitated, his knife inching closer to his captive's neck. "I don't think so," he said finally.

The other Fae tensed, some of them reaching for their knives of dark glass, or their blowdart reeds. Everyone in the band tightened their grips on their weapons, and some of the Flamedancers lit fire in their hands. Tensions rose.

"What do you mean?" Jak asked Kuldain, holding out her hands to the Fae and Watchers alike, trying to calm them down. She had to keep this under control. "You said you would let him go if they let me go."

"*It might try to kill me in a heartbeat if I set it free,*" Kuldain said. He still had that disturbing grin on his face. "And what's to stop the rest of these creatures from falling on us the moment I do so?"

"They won't, I give you my word," Jak replied.

Kuldain's laugh echoed in the cave beyond. "You honestly expect me to believe that you speak for them? You who have only known of their existence for no more than a few days. You think you know all there is to know, huh?"

"They are not what the rumors say they are. They are not demons. They wouldn't kill anyone."

"They do kill, I have seen it happen. Perhaps they are not like demons in the sense that they are smarter and can think for themselves. We've seen enough to prove that. But they are no less vile, no less perverted by the magics they twisted."

"They didn't twist any magic, they don't even have brands. A long time ago they discovered an original copy of the Annals of Adam, and it changed them."

"Nonsense, there are no original copies of that book left," Kuldain said, but Jak noticed Naem's face change to something of curiosity. And he wasn't the only one. Several of the men and women of the group were glancing at each other, some were whispering under their breath.

"None that we know of," Jak went on. "But they found one hidden in this very cave, perhaps put there by Adam himself. It's a Holy Relic and it has power. It's what sparked their transformation."

"And I suppose your little Fae friends told you that."

"I've seen the Relic. I could feel its power."

"The false impressions on an impressionable mind."

Jak's lips grew thin. She didn't say anything further, but Kuldain smiled knowingly. "I will allow you to rejoin our ranks, as you have obviously been deceived by these cunning devils. I will forgive and forget. But only this once. Forget these foolish notions that have been placed in your head. I know these Fae far better than you do."

Jak looked at the ground. This was all going wrong. What to do? She took a deep breath and thought through her options. She had to save the Fae's life. Doing so would avoid a slaughter of Watchers and Fae. Perhaps if she went along with Kuldain, he would let him go. But no, he wasn't showing any signs of relenting.

Kuldain respected assertiveness though, at least as far as Jak could tell. Perhaps if she stood her ground, he would respect her enough to do as she asked.

A hand touched her shoulder and she looked to see her mother standing there. It was the first time that she'd seen her mother in any clear light. She was beautiful, and Jak could see something of herself in that gaze. It gave her strength.

She looked back at Kuldain. He was staring at Karlona, and his grin turned to a sneer. "Well, doesn't this feel familiar," he said while meeting Karlona's gaze. What did he mean by that?

Jak shrugged off the odd comment and stared Kuldain straight in the eye, feeling confidence fill her. She had to do something for these Fae. For her mother. They were her people as much as the humans were.

"After my father died, I thought that all I wanted was to become one of the Watchers. I thought, maybe then I could be useful. But I was wrong. This is where I belong, between you and these Fae. Because they are *people*, Kuldain. They are good people! So let that one go, and I promise you, no harm will come to any of you!"

Had she gone too far? Naem and Marek were staring at her, and she couldn't quite read the expressions on their faces. Others among the Watchers glanced at each other, unsure of what just happened. It was unusual for her to stand up to authority like this, and they knew that by now.

Kuldain glanced around himself, recognizing the band's hesitation. "So that's your decision then?" He said, softer than before. "You'd be willing to sacrifice your place with us, to align yourself with these... beasts?"

Jak nodded. "I would."

Kuldain sneered again, looking from Jak, to her mother standing beside her. "So be it."

Jak started, the man wasn't about to...

Without another word, Kuldain tightened his grip on the captured Fae and slit its throat.

**B**efore Jak could scream, everything around her erupted into

chaos. The Shadow Fae surrounding her on all sides leapt into action. Watchers on the front lines braced themselves for the coming attack. Telekinetics and Flamedancers put up their hands, the black lines of their brands turning a glowing white as they activated.

The Telekinetics did their best to lift Fae off the ground, rendering them helpless so that the Flamedancers could make short work of them with the flames sprouting from their open palms. But many of the Fae had already turned invisible now, or nearly so. Major Skellig led the Flamedancers as they formed a perimeter around the band and spewed flames in all directions. That was enough to catch one or two Shadow Fae off guard, becoming fully visible and staggering back from the flames, parts of their flesh and clothing already alight.

But most of the Shadow Fae were smarter.

From unseen positions, poison darts began to fly. They came from every direction, from the surrounding trees, rocks, and from the cave itself. Some hit armor and fell harmlessly to the ground. But others found flesh, through breaks in the armor. Within seconds, men and women began to fall. Then Fae were leaping out of the trees and flanking the band on both sides. In their hands, they held slim daggers that quickly buried themselves into the flesh of the Watchers.

The band, who had performed so efficiently against a group of demons, struggled with this new threat.

Jak watched it all in horror, her mouth open in a silent scream. Her mother was gone, no longer at her side, probably aiding the fight. And through it all, Kuldain watched her, that same sneer on his face. He had not broken their gaze since he cut the captive Fae's throat.

A few darts came at Kuldain, but he simply plucked them from his skin and threw them away, with no sign of the effects of the poison. Even in the middle of a battle, Jak could see that something was wrong. Blood-burning didn't make one immune to poison, did it?

A Shadow Fae came for Kuldain, but the man was too fast. His arms shot out and grasped the Fae by its wrists. Then his Blood-

burning activated. The Fae instantly dissolved into ash. Jak gasped, she had never seen Blood-burning work that quickly before! Kuldain was more powerful than he let on.

She spotted Naem, who was fully concentrated on the battle. His gift of Grace allowed him to weave in and out of the fight, dodging the knives and darts of the Shadow Fae just in time. Jak winced as she saw his spear take out a Shadow Fae. She had to stop this!

But there was nothing she could do. She had no weapon. Her brand was useless to her. People on both sides of the conflict had already forgotten about her, lost in the battle. Even her mother was gone. Perhaps if she used her brand again to make something explode or catch on fire? That might work. She looked all around to find something, anything that might work. A rock caught her attention and she stooped to pick it up. Calling to mind the same determination that she'd felt the last time she activated her brand, she focused to infuse the rock with a Flamedancer brand.

Nothing.

Panicking, she tried again, but nothing worked as the battle raged on around her.

Disadvantaged as they were, the Watchers still had far greater numbers than the Fae. One by one, a soldier would score a lucky strike, or a Flamedancer would set a tree on fire with Shadow Fae still in it. There were only two dozen or so of the Fae, most of the inhabitants of this particular cave. Jak knew there were others, but her mother had implied that they were far away, beyond their reach.

She looked for her mother everywhere, but couldn't see her. Perhaps she was safely back inside the cave. She hoped so.

Kuldain was part of the battle now, but he too seemed to be looking for someone. He fought when he was attacked, but otherwise he walked slowly, deliberately through the chaos. Then his eyes found what he was looking for, and he moved faster. Jak followed his gaze, and her heart nearly stopped. It was Karlona, who stood with two knives at the ready, facing down Kuldain.

They circled each other for a few seconds before Karlona made the first strike. She leapt forward, and her daggers swiped at Kuldain. The man was quick to dodge. He let Karlona move right past him, casually sidestepping. If he wanted to, he could have reached out and used his magic to burn Karlona to ashes. Why didn't he?

Jak could see Kuldain saying something to her mother, but with the sound of battle raging across the clearing, she couldn't make out what they were saying. Whatever it was, it angered her mother, who lunged forward one more time. This time her blades nearly met their mark. Kuldain barely got out of the way in time. He still had no weapon in hand, his sword still sheathed at his side.

The battle around them continued for several minutes more, but Jak could tell that the Watchers were beginning to have the upper hand. The Telekinetics were the ones primarily responsible. Their abilities allowed them to freeze the Fae in place, and now that the Fae were fewer in number, and had fully revealed themselves, the Telekinetics were able to find each one and subdue them. Only a handful of Fae remained alive.

Jak watched as the remaining Fae froze under the influence of a Telekinetic who stood with his arms outstretched, holding each of the Fae in place. That left only Karlona and Kuldain, who were still fighting. With the rest of the Fae incapacitated, the others turned to watch, waiting to see what would happen. Jak's heart sank as she realized the fight was completely one-sided. As skilled as her mother seemed to be, Kuldain played with her like a kitten. He grinned as he watched her grow more and more frustrated.

Finally, he was done playing games. On Karlona's next pass, he dodged once again and caught her arm. Karlona screamed, and Jak realized she was screaming too. Her mother's knives fell from her hands as agonizing pain shot through the Shadow Fae. But Kuldain did not kill her instantly like he had some of the others. He must not have been using the full extent of his powers. Just a taste.

Jak felt an arm around her, and she tried to shrug it off, not taking her eyes off her mother. Her mother! She had come all this way and now she was losing the only parent she had left!

Kuldain spoke again to Karlona, but since the battle had died down, Jak could make out the words this time.

"This isn't like last time, Karlona, you have no power over us now."

Karlona stirred and glared at Kuldain. Darkness began to gather around her, a last attempt. But it quickly dissipated as Karlona screamed once more. Kuldain was using his magic on her again.

Jak yelled and rushed at Kuldain, but something was holding her back. She turned to see Marek, firmly grasping her shoulders. "Let go of me!" she exclaimed.

"I'm sorry, I can't." Marek said. "You'll only make things worse."

"That's my mother!" she yelled in exasperation. She saw Marek's eyes widen, then narrow in confusion.

"How?"

Jak took advantage of his confusion to wiggle free of his grip. Then she ran towards Kuldain and her mother.

She never stood a chance.

With one heavily muscled arm, Kuldain grabbed her wrist as she closed in.

Pain! Agony like nothing she had ever experienced ran through her

entire body. She was on fire, she was fire! Surely, this was what death felt like.

And then it was gone. Disoriented, she found herself on the ground, lying near her mother. Her eyes refused to focus properly and she felt foggy as she tried to think. Her heart raced, and adrenaline eventually brought her back to reality.

Kuldain was speaking again. "Bring me that one," he ordered, pointing to a Shadow Fae subdued by a Telekinetic. The Fae struggled and cursed. It was Vander, the one who hadn't trusted her. He had been right after all. They should never have trusted her.

"We'll take these two as hostages, proof of the threat that these Fae pose. We'll take them for the Gifters and Alchemists to study and dissect. That should help us understand these Fae and any others that threaten the Kingdom."

"And the rest of them, sir?" one of the Telekinetics asked.

"Kill them all."

"No!" Jak screamed. She was supposed to protect these people, to be their ambassador.

"Sir, we have them at our mercy, they're unarmed." Jak turned to look at the protestor. It was Naem. He had advanced to the front of the line and now stood next to Marek. Both of them looked shocked and disapproving. "We can't just kill unarmed prisoners."

"You can and you will. They would do the same to you."

"All due respect, sir, but I see no reason why they would. We attacked first. They were willing to talk." A few soldiers lowered their heads. Was that shame? "They had the girl for days and haven't harmed her."

Kuldain looked at the remaining Watchers, could see the doubt in their eyes. When he spoke, his voice was fire. "Sergeant, you are hereby stripped of rank and will face trial when we reach Foothold. You will not question me on this matter. I know these creatures. And anyone else who wishes to question my orders will meet the same fate. Now execute the rest of these monsters!"

"Sir, may I have a word in private?" This time it was Major Skellig speaking. She was smarter not to disagree in public with the Colonel, but Jak could see the disapproval on her face.

"No, you may not, Major." Kuldain responded. "If we give these creatures any leeway, they will turn on us. This is not up for discussion. Obey my orders."

Skellig kept her gaze on Kuldain, but finally waved one hand, bowing her head as she did so. The rest understood. They would obey or lose their rank like Naem.

Jak could feel the tears in her eyes as she watched the remaining Fae die. The Watchers obeyed their orders, though Jak thought she



saw a hint of reluctance in their actions. She heard her mother and Vander yelling and struggling to get free and save their comrades. But it was no use. Soon, they were the only two that remained.

Naem and Marek did not join in the slaughter. The former only stood there disbelieving. Jak couldn't read the expression on Marek's face. She looked for Major Skellig, who had said nothing throughout the whole exchange. She was watching Kuldain with a new expression on her face. Distrust?

Kuldain spoke again, "Now take these two and make sure their bonds are tight."

Some of the Watchers moved forward to do as commanded. They bound Vander, then moved on to Karlona, who was still lying incapacitated on the ground next to Jak. Lying there, watching them drag her mother off gave Jak new energy.

"You monster!" She tried, futile as it was, to lash out at Kuldain. But once again pain coursed through her and she collapsed once more. Kuldain's Blood-burning, even in a non-lethal dose, caused all her muscles to simply stop working. Her head swam, and the light slowly faded as she lost consciousness.

Jak wasn't sure if it was hours or days later when she awoke. She was lying on a makeshift cot, with two sticks on either side and a cloth strung between them. But currently she was on the ground, and it was completely dark, save for the warm flicker of firelight nearby.

"Oh good, you're awake." Jak turned to see Naem sitting there. "I was worried there for a while."

Jak put a hand to her head. She had a headache that could stop a bear, and her body ached all over. Blood-burning was not a pleasant thing to live through.

"What happened?" she asked. She could barely remember anything.

"Well, after Kuldain incapacitated you, he ordered me and some of the others to carry you down the mountain. We traveled all day and eventually made camp here. Me and Marek carried you."

It was only then that Jak noticed her arms were tied together. She tried to loosen her wrists.

"Don't bother, the knots are tight." Naem held up his own hands, which were also tied with rope. He allowed his hands a bit more freedom, probably because he had to help carry Jak's cot. But they were no less confining.

"Oh, Naem, I'm sorry I got you into all this. If I had just gone with the rest of my village to Tradehall, you wouldn't have had to..."

She cut off as Naem took her hands in his. Staring her straight in the eye, he said, "Jak, this is not your fault. I don't regret it for a moment. In fact, having you here...has been the best thing to happen to me in a long while."

Jak almost blushed, despite the situation. But another thought quickly overrode her response. "What about my mother, and Vander?"

"You mean the Shadow Fae? Kuldain has them restrained at the front of the camp. I think he wanted to keep an eye on them personally. Thankfully, he doesn't seem to care as much about us. Though I'm surprised he even let you live."

"He knows that Karlona is my mother, I think he still sees me as a

curiosity.”

“Yeah, so would you care to explain how a Fae is your mother?”

“She wasn’t a Fae when I was conceived, though she became one while pregnant with me. I suppose that makes me some sort of mutant hybrid? It might explain my hair.”

“I suppose it would.” Before Jak could think, Naem’s hand touched the strand of red hair that wove throughout her raven locks. She didn’t say anything. His hand didn’t go away. Jak swallowed. Part of her wanted him to continue, part of her didn’t. There was just too much going on. One thing at a time. She was grateful when his hand finally retreated, and Naem winced as he shifted his position on the hard earth.

That was when she noticed his leg was bleeding. “Naem!” she cried, “You’re injured.”

“It’s nothing,” he said. “A Fae dagger nicked me, that’s all. It looks worse than it feels.”

“Let me see it.” Jak put both her tied hands forward and grabbed his leg to get a closer look. It certainly looked bad. “Relics, Naem. And they had you walking around, carrying me like this? Don’t the Watchers have any Healers?”

“We don’t actually. Healers rarely join the Watchers, since most of them are pacifists. And Kuldain said the pain might help me learn a lesson. Your friend Marek though, he brought me some brandy to wash it with. That helped a little.”

Jak felt a moment of gratitude for Marek. And not for the first time.

“Still, with everything that has happened. Why can’t people just mind their own business? The Fae weren’t harming anyone.”

“Kuldain seems to think they do.”

“And you still trust Kuldain?”

Naem hesitated, “I suppose not anymore.”

“I keep feeling like there’s more that he’s not telling us. Some other reason why he hates the Fae so much.”

Naem nodded, “That would make some sense. Either that or he’s just much more irrational than we gave him credit for. Not that any motivation could rationalize his behavior back there. But maybe you’re right, maybe there is something we don’t know.”

“It’s not your place to know anything, just to obey.” It was Estel, coming to taunt them. Jak groaned. Why was it that Estel always seemed to show up when Jak was feeling irritable?

Naem sighed. “What was your name again?” Jak was sure he knew, but she felt satisfaction at seeing the indignance on Estel’s face.

“I am Estel, and I’ve been assigned to guard the two of you today. I am Major Skellig’s protege. So you better not toy with me or she will

hear of it. That's all you would need, to get in any more trouble than you already are."

Jak chuckled. "If Skellig has taken the time to get to know you, she would probably thank us."

Estel glared at her. "And what do you know? You, who were so useless they could only spare a young Sergeant, barely older than yourself, to train you. You, who got us into this mess. Honestly, I don't know why the Colonel didn't just toss you away after the battle. People died because you stood up for those...things!"

Jak clenched her jaw. "People died because Kuldain wouldn't see reason. They are not monsters, Estel, they are people."

"No, you and I are people. Or at least I am. We don't look like something out of a child's nightmare."

Before Jak could respond, she heard a bugle blow, and realized that the sky was already starting to brighten. Naem sighed and rose to his feet, wincing as he put pressure on his leg.

"May I assume you won't need carrying any longer?" he said to Jak, completely ignoring Estel who still stood there with hands on hips.

Jak got to her feet as well. "Yeah, that's a safe assumption."

"Good, because you were very heavy." He winced as she punched his arm with both of her tied hands.

Estel was staring open-mouthed at the two of them. Jak almost smiled. It was almost more satisfying to pretend that Estel was not there rather than argue with her.

Sadly, the satisfaction lasted only a moment before Estel began running her mouth off again. This continued, with Jak and Naem never getting a word in, until the Watchers were up and moving again. As much as Estel's voice grated at her, Jak eventually learned to tune it out. Thankfully, Estel even quieted once she realized that no one was listening. She walked, sulky, as they progressed down the mountainside.

Naem's leg was growing worse. He hid it well, but Jak could tell that he was quickly tiring. His limp became ever-more pronounced, and she could see blood soaking the bandage. He was going to need proper medical help soon, or...Jak didn't want to think about it.

She looked around for Skellig. The Major was the only one Jak trusted to help Naem. But she couldn't see her anywhere. With Naem's leg as it was, they began to fall behind, towards the back of the camp.

"Keep moving!" Estel cried. "Don't think you can slack off because you got a small scratch. There are others with far worse than you."

Yeah, and they all got help, Jak thought. But she didn't say it out loud. A small plan was beginning to form in her head. Perhaps they could find help faster.

As they continued to slow, Estel grew increasingly frustrated. Even some of the other Watchers were beginning to glance at her. Jak could see them roll their eyes when Estel was not looking. Soon enough, they were at the back of the camp.

“I’m serious, you need to pick up the pace or I’ll...”

“You’ll get Major Skellig and tell on us? Good, Skellig is exactly the person we need right now. Why don’t you run along and get her for us.”

Estel frowned, “You can’t get rid of me that easy. Without me, you could slip away in the dark.”

“Not a bad idea,” Jak said in a cheerful tone. She steeled herself. This next part was going to hurt a little.

Focusing as hard as she could under the circumstances, she imagined a Firedancer brand once again. Last time when she had focused her determination, it hadn’t worked. That left one other theory, that it involved truth. She had always heard that truth was a powerful force for magic. Maybe that was the key. Testing her theory, she summoned a truth in her mind, *I hate Estel*.

Instantly the ropes tying her hands burst into flame. Jak winced as they burned and caused blisters to form where the ropes touched her wrists. But she felt a satisfaction as the bonds quickly fell from her hands. Triumphant, she turned to deal with Estel.

The girl was staring at her wide-eyed, true fear evident on her face. “You...you can’t. Kuldain will kill you. I...HEL—”

Jak punched her in the face.

Estel staggered back, her nose beginning to spew blood, her cry for help lost on her lips. Naem was staring at both of them. His mouth hung open.

“Now you listen here, you miserable excuse for a human,” Jak said. “You’re going to play nicely, or I’ll do to you what I just did to that rope.”

“You...you wouldn’t! You can’t!”

“I would, and I can. You said it yourself, I’m in league with the Fae. How do you know I won’t just turn you into one of them!” She couldn’t of course, but Estel didn’t know that.

“What’s going on here?” It was Skellig. Jak had been so focused on Estel that she hadn’t even noticed the Major approach on her horse. Marek was there too, standing beside Skellig. He carried something in his hands, food perhaps?

Jak felt ice form in her stomach. She had wanted Skellig to arrive earlier. But now that she was free and threatening Estel, Skellig would probably lock her right up again. But then again, Skellig could plainly see Jak was free from her bonds, and yet wasn’t doing anything. Marek was staring from Jak to Estel, a hint of amusement on his lips.

“I...uh, was showing Estel what I can do with my brand. She didn’t seem to think I could do anything with it.”

“Hmmm,” Skellig seemed to be considering something. “Very well, carry on!”

Shock showed on Estel’s face. Jak almost laughed, but instead said. “Yes sir, thank you sir.”

“And Jak,” Skellig said. “Your friend, my former Sergeant will need medical help. I can do nothing for him, but there are healers in Foothold. If someone were to, say take a shortcut, they might find themselves ahead of us.”

“Ah...what shortcut would that be, sir?”

“Well, if I were on my own, or with a friend, I would slide down the snowbank about a hundred paces to the left which will take you nearly to the base of the mountain, then find the stream that leads out of the mountain to take me the rest of the way to Foothold. I might freeze, but I’d get there soon. Especially if I used a shield like this one to slide down the bank...oops!” Skellig promptly dropped her own shield. “Clumsy me.”

Jak nodded her head gratefully. “That’s some good advice, I’ll have to remember it.”

Major Skellig nodded, bent low to speak a few words to Marek, then trotted off towards the front of the band.

Estel, for once, had no words to say. She simply stared at the Major, her jaw permanently affixed to the ground.

Marek walked over to Jak and Naem and handed them a small loaf of dry bread, which he had obviously brought for Jak. It wasn’t much, but Jak could feel her appreciation for her old friend increase. “She wants me to watch that one.” He pointed at Estel. “To make sure she doesn’t squawk to the Colonel. No one else is looking, so you should probably go now.”

Jak rushed forward and gave him a big hug. “Thank you, Marek. I know we haven’t had much time to spend together on this trip. I hope we can change that.” She didn’t notice Naem glance away.

“I’d like that, but right now you need to get as far away from Kuldain as you can. Get Naem some help, but then you need to go.”

“What do you mean?”

“You can’t be in Foothold when the Colonel shows up. He’ll boil your blood. He’ll probably do the same to us once he realizes you’re gone.”

“He won’t know you helped me.”

“Oh, of course he will. Even if he can’t prove it, he’ll need someone to blame. Who better than your best friend from Riverbrook?” Marek shrugged as if it were no big deal. “But what’s the worst that he’ll do, demote me like Naem? Banish me from the Watchers? Honestly, I

don't know if I'd care anymore."

"Just take care of yourself."

"I will, but you seriously need to go now. Sooner or later someone will take notice, someone not as understanding as Major Skellig."

Jak nodded and motioned for Naem to accompany her. Together they moved off to the left, towards the snowbank that Skellig had indicated, taking the Major's shield with them.

"I won't forget this, Marek!" she said as they left.

Marek only nodded and raised one hand in farewell. Then he spoke to Estel and the two of them continued on with the rest of the Watchers. Estel still looked stone faced, an unusual look for her.

Naem was beginning to stumble as they lost sight of the Watcher band. Jak put one of his arms over her shoulders to help him walk. Her only focus now was to find help for Naem before his injury killed him.

**I**t didn't take long for Jak to realize that they might have been

better off with the Watchers. They had nothing to help with Naem's wound, and Jak was not sure they could outpace the Watchers to Foothold, even when taking the shortcut that Skellig suggested.

"You know," Naem mumbled, "I always wanted to sled down a snowbank. Never thought I'd do so under these circumstances however." He stumbled and Jak nearly fell under the shift in weight. How was it that men were so heavy? Plus there was the added weight of Skellig's full-body shield to carry. Jak wasn't exactly built like an ox, so it didn't take long before she was taking big deep breaths.

They passed tree after tree for what felt like hours. At this rate they would never get to Foothold ahead of the others. Jak could only hope that they'd make up the time later. But Naem concerned her. He kept stumbling and leaning on her more, which further slowed them down. But finally, they got clear of the trees and could see nothing but snow for miles.

Jak swallowed. It was a very long way down. But, ignoring her anxiety, she unshouldered Skellig's shield. It was long, made of wood, and meant to cover one's whole body. When a group of these shields were placed together they made a wall that was almost impossible to penetrate. It proved very effective against demons. But now they were using it as a sled, and they had yet to see whether it would work.

Setting Naem down first, Jak set the shield down on its side, and sat down towards the back end. She almost screamed as it slipped forward and she had to catch herself before the sled took her down and away from Naem. She held the sled in place while Naem crawled in front of her.

"This isn't exactly how I imagined us getting to know each other better," he said as he sat in front of her, her arms wrapping around him for good measure.

"Oh shut up, now's not the time," she said with exasperation. "We're about to hurtle down this mountain faster than a horse can run, and we'll probably hit something and be thrown into the air at



breakneck speeds into a tree or a rock, breaking every bone in our bodies. We'll have little or no control over where this sled goes and if the direction isn't perfect, we'll probably end up falling over a cliff on one side, or into the trees on the other."

Naem blinked. "Well, I'm certainly glad you're remaining optimistic about everything. You left out the part about how, with my leg being what it is, even if we do make it to the bottom, I probably won't be able to walk from there to Foothold."

"Yeah." Jak was beginning to breathe in and out with increasing speed. "That part."

She waited a moment longer, steeling herself. She could do this. Yes, she could probably do this. Naem filled the temporary silence, "But you also know that the longer we wait here, the less likely I am to survive, right?"

"Right...okay. Well, here goes nothing." Placing both hands on either side of them, Jak gave them both a push. As they started inching forward and slowly picking up speed, her last words were, "Remember, whatever happens don't let go of the SHIIIIIELD!"

Before she had finished speaking they were already moving with more speed than Jak had ever experienced. This...this was no fun at all! They hurtled down the mountain side, thankfully in the right direction. Jak wanted desperately to close her eyes and wait for it to be over, but she simply could not stop staring at the path in front of her. Naem was saying nothing, but she could feel his body tense in front of her.

They had only been travelling for a minute, but it felt like hours to Jak, before the unthinkable happened and the shield began to spin to one side and then turn around completely. Jak almost fell backwards off the shield, but instead held as tight as she could to its edges. But the imbalance of weight caused the makeshift sled to topple end over end, sending Jak and Naem flying.

*Don't let go, don't let go!* was all Jak could think. When she had finished tumbling and came to a stop, she was almost shocked to see one hand still attached to the shield. She almost cried with relief. If they lost that shield, they would never make it down the mountain.

Knee deep in snow, Jak looked around to find Naem. He had come to rest some ten feet away.

"Naem, are you alright, Naem!" Jak staggered to her feet and felt cold clutch her heart as she started to make her way over to him, and it wasn't the cold of the mountain. Naem's chest was rising and falling rapidly like he was coughing or his body convulsing. "Naem! Talk to me!"

"That," Naem said, "was easily the most fun I've had in years."

Jak stopped in place. He hadn't been convulsing, he had been

laughing!

Feeling foolish, Jak arranged them back on the sled to try again. She said nothing to Naem about how worried she had just been for him. He didn't need to know that. Instead, she took a moment to look around and picture how far they had come.

She was surprised to see that they had travelled quite a long way in a matter of minutes. The peak of the mountain near where they had started now stood far off, and she could barely make out the river below. Even better, she could see Foothold from here!

Encouraged, they started again, and Jak braced herself for the break-neck speeds they were experiencing. Naem was having a grand old time, but Jak could not see how anyone could enjoy this.

They fell twice more on the way down, both times Jak managed to keep hold of the shield, and both times Naem seemed to thoroughly enjoy the fall. Men were odd.

Finally, blessedly, they reached the base of the snowbank where temperatures had increased enough for the snow to melt. Jak managed to stop the momentum of the shield as she noticed a line of trees growing larger and larger. Then the sled stopped altogether. Jak could only sit for a moment, and it took a while for her to realize that they were not dead. Only when Naem, groaning, tried to roll off the sled, did she come back to her senses.

"That was amazing," Naem said. "I'll bet we just made up at least a day's march in just a few minutes. Perhaps we *can* make it to Foothold before the others."

Jak wasn't so sure. Yes, they had made good time, but the hard part was about to begin. Naem still couldn't walk very well on his leg, and they had a lot of walking to do before reaching the river. And then, Jak really had no idea how they would push forward from there. They had no boat, no rope to make a raft. They couldn't just wade into the freezing water, as the cold would probably kill them both.

Choosing not to think about that right now, she helped Naem get to his feet, picked up the shield, and they began to walk.

By the time they made it to the river, both of them were almost ready to collapse. Naem's bandages needed changing, and Jak had nothing. It didn't help that he put almost all of his weight on her when they tried to walk. Jak could still see no possible solution to their problem now. They couldn't walk down the rest of the mountain, not with Naem's leg being what it was. And she could see no way for them to get in the water. What could they do?

She didn't realize she had spoken aloud until Naem responded, "Well, if we only had a good way to chop one of those trees down, and hollow it out in a few hours, perhaps we could make a sort of boat. I don't know how we would do that though, but with the right

tools it would be quicker than building a raft.”

Hollow out one of the large trees and use it as a boat? She could make a fire with her brands, could she somehow find a way to topple one of the larger trees? There were plenty to choose from.

Well, she had little else to go on, so she started looking for any sharp rocks in the area. Perhaps if she could embed one in the base of a tree, then use her brand to make it explode, then maybe she could bring a tree down.

After a few minutes of searching she found several sharp-looking rocks. Using a much larger rock as a hammer, she set about embedding them into a nearby oak. It took far longer to properly insert the rock, but eventually she had placed the rock about half its length into the tree. Now to see if any of this could work.

Jak focused on the Flamedancer brand just as she had before, willing it to become a part of the sharp rock. Once the brand had taken, she ran to gain a safe distance. She thought she heard a slight whine coming from the rock, then it began to glow and a moment later it exploded, violently. Much more violently than before. Perhaps that was due to being partially contained by the tree.

As Jak peered at the tree, she felt a rush of elation. The tree now had a gaping hole on one side. And she could almost see the strain as the remaining portion of the tree's trunk tried to hold up the tall oak.

Hurriedly, she embedded another rock on the other side of the tree, and repeated the process. This time, she was satisfied with a large crack, and the oak toppled with a massive noise.

Jak yelled with delight and went to examine the fallen tree. It only took her a few minutes longer to repeat the process further along the trunk, cutting it off and making it just long enough for a boat that could fit two people. Then she set about making a fire.

This part took much longer, especially given the fact that Jak did not have the strength to lift the large log on her own. She had to hollow it out first. So she started by embedding more rocks into one side of the trunk, then proceeding to blow each one up. Each explosion tore a new hole in the side of the trunk. Then she started the fire by using her brand on a large piece of wood. It was long work, but eventually, with enough flames going, she was able to carve out certain portions of the log.

While she worked, she busied her mind by running through the events of the past few days. So much had happened. She had found her mother, the very thing that had started her on this quest in the first place. If only it could have ended there. But the complication of her mother being a Fae, and Kuldain's insistence that the Fae were dangerous, despite what Jak had experienced. For the briefest moment, Jak wondered if Kuldain could be right. After all, she had

only just met the Fae. Could she be trusting them just because her mother was among them? But no, that didn't feel right at all. She couldn't second guess this.

She paused only to check up on Naem, who was still lying near the water's edge, trying very hard not to fall asleep. Once or twice, Jak had to rouse him. They didn't want him falling asleep in his condition. He might not wake up. But she couldn't dwell on that thought.

Even though they had escaped from the Watcher camp before the sun was up, the day was almost over by the time Jak had a workable boat ready. It had taken a lot of burning and scraping of the tree, but she finally had something she could work with. With all her might, she dragged the hollowed-out oak to the edge of the water. It was still very heavy.

When she stepped into the river, she almost stepped right back out again. The water was frigid and she felt needles pricking her feet. Her discomfort quickly turned into delight as she saw her crude boat actually float on the water. She was so excited that she almost let it float away. Quickly, she grabbed the boat and brought it back to shore before it could go any further.

She had to slap Naem's face a bit to get his attention. "Naem, get up! The boat is ready...I think."

Naem only mumbled, but with Jak's help, got to his feet. This wasn't good. Sooner or later he wouldn't be able to stand at all, and Jak wouldn't be able to hold him up. They had to find help and fast.

She helped him into the boat. Slowly and carefully she pushed it away from the river's edge and used a long, fallen branch to guide it. This was it. If they couldn't get to help now, they never would.

The river was rough in places, and it was often hard for Jak to keep the boat steady. She had paddled along their own river near Riverbrook, but those waters were far calmer in comparison. This one was still going downhill and it often resulted in white rapids and other really violent sections of the river. There were no waterfalls, thankfully. They were far enough down the mountainside for that. But Jak only barely managed to keep them afloat at times. She kept no track of time. All her attention was spent on the boat.

Naem was concerning her. He kept dozing off and she had to bring him back with light conversation. She talked to him about her time in Riverbrook, asked him about his own experience with the Watchers, fantasized about all the good food and rest they would get in Foothold. That part seemed to cheer Naem up, though he didn't say much anymore. His leg was continuing to fester, the infection spreading. The time it took to make a boat had not been kind to him. The urgency only caused Jak to move the boat faster. She had already lost too many people and was not about to lose Naem too.

By the time the sun was setting, the river was beginning to level out, and Jak could see the tall tower of Foothold in the distance. They were almost there.

“Naem,” she said, “I can see Foothold!”

Naem raised himself on his arms a bit. “Never seen something that beautiful before in my life...” his mumbling trailed off, but Jak caught a few more words, “cept you...of course.”

If he hadn’t been about to die, Jak might have blushed. As it was, she only sped up the boat as best she could. She couldn’t see anyone out around the river. Surely someone would be nearby to help her get Naem somewhere safe. She spotted one or two cottages surrounding the stronghold, but couldn’t see much else.

The tower for which Foothold was known rose several hundred feet into the air. In the past, it had been used as a major trade outpost, but now mostly served as a training ground for young Watcher officers. At least that’s what Naem had told her on their ride down. At its base ran a thick stone wall that circled around the entire stronghold. As they drew closer, Jak could see a giant door, portcullis, and a bridge crossing a large moat that circled the fortress.

The door and portcullis were shut.

Jak’s heart dropped to her stomach. Someone would be there to open the door, right? Surely.

Jak docked the boat along the side of the river and got out. They were several hundred feet away from the entrance to Foothold and would need to walk the rest of the way. But when Jak tried to lift Naem out of the boat, he simply could not put weight on his leg. He was too tired to do anything. Jak pulled for all she was worth and managed to get him out of the boat and splash into the river shallows. The shock of the cold was enough to make Naem gasp. But he still said nothing and only barely seemed aware of his surroundings.

“Come on, Naem. Stand up. You can do it.” But it was no use. Naem was not budging, and he was too heavy for Jak to carry. So she pulled him out of the water and left him to rest on the bank. “I’ll be right back.”

She ran as fast as her legs would carry her to the edge of the moat, facing the stronghold.

“HEY!” she yelled at the top of her lungs and waved her arms over her head. “I NEED HELP. MY FRIEND IS DYING!”

No answer. Where were all the people?

“HELLO, IS ANYONE THERE? PLEASE, I NEED YOUR HELP.”

She kept shouting for several minutes before she heard a voice call out.

“Be quiet,” it almost whispered. Jak had to lean in to hear.

“Oh hello? Please you have to help me.”

“Shhhh, you’ll bring them.”

“Bring who?”

“The demons.”

Jak felt her heart drop once again. She glanced back at Naem. His body still lay on the edge of the river, no demons in sight. “Please, if you could just open the gate just long enough for my friend to get across. He’s hurt and I don’t think he’ll live past the night if someone doesn’t help him. He’s one of the Watchers,” she added, hoping that would help. She knew there was a Watcher garrison here.

There was a long pause from the wall. Finally another person spoke, slightly louder. “We’ll lower the bridge for just a minute. Your friend is the one by the river?”

“Yes, I’ll need help to bring him here.”

“We’ll send someone to help. Just don’t make any loud noises or you’ll attract them.”

Jak nodded, “Okay,” she said in lower tones, “Thank you.”

A creak of wood against metal sounded as the bridge began to lower. Jak felt herself let out a breath she hadn’t known she was holding. All that work and they were finally here, away from Kuldain, somewhere where they could get medical help, food, and rest.

Then the shouting started.

The portcullis came to a grinding halt half-way up. More yells, and all Jak could make out were, “Close it, close it!” To her horror, the portcullis began to fall.

“No! What are you doing? Please...STOP!”

“I’m sorry girl. I’m sorry!” was the only response she got. Why were they changing their minds?

Whirling, Jak looked behind her, checking on Naem in the distance.

And froze.

Approaching her was a being who radiated light in all directions. It almost seemed to float as it approached. In the twilight, it looked eerie the way light seemed to flow from it. Its clothes also floated, like gravity had no hold on it.

It came closer to Jak, but an arrow loosed from the wall of the stronghold nearly reached its feet, and it stopped in its tracks. It looked at the arrow, then up at the wall, considering. Then its head turned to consider Naem lying not far away. And it began walking...or gliding towards him.

“Wait, no, don’t touch him!” Before Jak could think, she was running in the direction of the new creature, barely taking thought to what it might be. All she knew was that she couldn’t let it harm Naem.

Jak cleared the distance within seconds. She was hungry, exhausted, and at her wit's end, but she still found the strength she needed. Whatever that thing was, she was not going to let it hurt Naem. She didn't pause to consider what she would do to prevent anything from happening. She had no weapon and limited magical ability. But she ran anyway.

"Please don't you hurt him!" she called out. It might have been a futile gesture, but it was all she could say.

The glowing....person, or whatever it was, turned to face her as she approached. But it made no aggressive moves towards her or Naem. That was a good sign, she hoped. But if the creature was harmless, why was everyone in Foothold afraid of it?

Jak was finally by Naem's side, placing herself squarely between him and the glowing newcomer. They stood that way for several heartbeats while the creature seemed to contemplate the two of them.

"I am not here to hurt him," it said eventually. "I was merely curious." Its voice reverberated and seemed to flow around them. It was...soothing.

"Curious about what?" Jak asked. As her mind caught up with her emotions, she was beginning to guess what this glowing person was.

"You two are outside the wall, not like the others. I came to see why?"

"We traveled down the river, we didn't know there was any kind of problem here."

"I can see that now. But you do not seem quite as scared as the others, except for your friend's life. Does my appearance not frighten you?"

"I...eh, I think I know who...ur, what you are. But my friend is hurt, can you help him?"

The newcomer considered for a moment. "I don't know if we can cure him, but there might be something we can do."

We? So there were more of them.

"Yes, please, anything you can do. At least help me find a dry place

for him to sleep.”

“Very well.” The being of light walked past Jak and bent forward to pick Naem up. He had surprising strength, as he managed to pick up Naem with no difficulty. Turning, he began walking from the direction he came, towards, Jak realized, one of the farms surrounding Foothold.

“I am Yewin,” he said as they walked. “You say you know who we are? I’m curious to know where you heard of us, and why you’re showing more trust than your friends behind the wall.”

*Well for one, I don’t have much choice,* Jak thought, but she didn’t say that aloud. “I heard of you from a Watcher who survived a battle with you. His story was...biased, and I have reason not to trust him. He seems to think that all Fae are evil.”

“Ah yes, that is the name people call us. The Fae, the Bright Ones. I suppose that is better than being called demons.”

“People think that about you too,” Jak cut in. “They think you used forbidden magics to make yourselves the way you appear.”

The Fae looked ahead and seemed to be staring a great way off. “I wish we knew how we came to be. It is one truth that eludes us.”

“Wait, so it wasn’t a Holy Relic, like the Annals of Adam?”

“The Annals of Adam? No, why would you ask?”

“Because the others...”

“You have met others of our kind?” The Fae actually stopped walking and turned to face Jak.

“Well yes,” said Jak taken aback. “There are Fae in the mountains, or at least there were. But they’re different. They’re Shadow Fae, and you’re....Bright.”

The Fae nodded and began walking back in the direction of the farm. “We have heard of these Shadow Fae. They are the reason we came here, to try and find our rumored cousins. We sought the truth. But the moment we arrived, the people of this fortress and the lands surrounding it fled from our face. Not one wanted to talk, as you do.”

“I’m sorry.” And Jak meant it. “It can’t be easy to be a Fae, especially when demons roam the lands, causing everyone to fear strange things that they do not understand.”

“We know. And we blame no one. Though the people of this fortress appeared to have a greater fear than most. Perhaps they had heard rumors.”

“That could be. The Watcher I knew, his name was Kuldain, he told us about his encounter with Fae like you, though he described you as sickly and said you get inside the heads of men to turn them mad.”

“This Kuldain of yours. Was he a tall man, with raven hair, and the brand of a Blood-burner?”



“Yes, do you know him?”

“We know him. He is the reason why we are so few. He slaughtered all but a dozen of our number.” The Bright Fae’s voice never shook, but Jak could see fury in its eyes.

“That’s not what he said. He said your people killed most of his squad. He was demoted for it when he returned to Skyecliff. Perhaps that is why everyone at Foothold was afraid of you. There’s a Watcher garrison there, maybe they heard about the attack.”

The Bright Fae nodded, “Perhaps, but that is not what happened. I don’t know how his comrades died, but it wasn’t by our hand. I would keep a wary eye on that Kuldain, there is more that he is not telling.”

Jak realized that the Fae could have been lying about the whole thing, but she found herself trusting him. Kuldain had given her no reason to trust his word, and the Shadow Fae had proven trustworthy. She could give this Bright Fae the benefit of the doubt.

By now, they had arrived at the farm. It wasn’t much bigger than the farmhouse Jak grew up in, though she couldn’t make out a stable or pen. Yet there were broad, golden fields behind it, so these were probably wheat farmers.

As they drew closer to the farmhouse, a door opened and another of these Bright Fae appeared. It too shone with a bright light, looking almost like a spirit, which would have frightened Jak if she didn’t already know something about them. What happened to the farmers? Yewin had said that all the locals fled into the fortress when they arrived. Had they simply abandoned their farms?

“Hail, Yewin. Why have you brought others here?”

“This one is hurt,” he said, indicating the unconscious Naem. “And we do not turn away those in need.”

“And the other?”

“It’s okay, I’m not afraid of you.” Jak said, “In fact, I think I can help you?”

The other studied her for a moment. This one was female, Jak realized. She almost couldn’t tell before.

“Very well, if Yewin vouches for you, you may enter. But we are watching.”

“I understand.”

Together with the first Bright Fae, Yewin as he was called, Jak entered the small cottage and took in her surroundings. It was a quaint cottage, with the parlor and kitchen all in one room. Dried herbs hung over a fireplace and there looked to be plenty of food exposed on a large table in the center of the room. Whoever had lived here had left in a hurry. But that wasn’t what made Jak swallow as she entered.

The parlor in front of her was full of Bright Fae. She quickly

counted a dozen including Yewin. These must represent all of the survivors Yewin spoke of.

“Clear the table.” Yewin commanded. The others obeyed, removing everything from atop a small wooden table in the room, though not without several furtive glances in Jak’s direction. Jak had never felt like such a stranger before, even while a prisoner of the Shadow Fae.

Yewin slowly set Naem on the table. The Watcher was still breathing, Jak realized with relief, but his breathing was shallow and his face pale.

“Henel,” Yewin addressed one of the others, “you know more about healing herbs than anyone else here, see if you can find some.” The Fae nodded and moved to start searching. Yewin addressed the others. “And the rest of you, see if you can find any strong drink. That might help us contain the infection.” The others obeyed, albeit reluctantly. They were still waiting for an explanation about why there were two normal humans here. Many were staring at her specifically. She did not like what she saw in their eyes.

Yewin set to work stripping the fabric from Naem’s leg and washing the wound with water. After some moments of examination, he looked at Jak, and she did not like what she saw there.

“You can help him, right?” she asked.

“We will do what we can, but it doesn’t look good right now. The infection has spread throughout his body. I’m not sure even a trained healer could help him now. A Branded healer maybe, but we have none of them.”

“And you don’t have any kind of...healing abilities?”

Yewin shook his head. “I’m afraid not. We may look like beings of magic, but our abilities are limited. Henel held a Healer brand, but lost the ability after we changed.”

“I know, brands don’t work on Fae,” Jak said, remembering what her mother had said.

Yewin looked at her with curiosity. “You truly know more about us than any other human we have ever met.”

“Isn’t there anything we can do?” Turning the conversation back to Naem, Jak could feel her panic boiling beneath the surface. She couldn’t afford to let it loose now.

Yewin glanced at the others. The woman who had let them in shook her head.

“What?” Jak asked, “You know something, please tell me! If it’s something I can do, I’ll do it. I’ll do anything!”

“It’s...not something we have ever shared with a human before.” Yewin said hesitantly. “It might not even work. It could be dangerous for you.”

“I’ll try it, anything.”

One of the Bright Fae caught Yewin's arm. "Are you sure?" he asked his comrade. "We don't fully understand our abilities yet."

Yewin nodded, "I agree it's hardly the scientific approach, but we'll never learn if we don't try."

"What are you talking about?" Jak asked. She wished on her life that she had her journal with her. There was so much she was learning.

Yewin turned to face her, looking like he was trying to figure out how to explain something very complicated. "You have met our cousins in the mountains, they are creatures of Shadow. And since you have met them, may I assume they possessed some abilities related to Shadow?"

Jak nodded. "They could blend in with their surroundings and create darkness around them. I don't know if they have any other abilities."

Yewin nodded and continued. "We are the opposite. We are beings of light. Apart from being able to create light around us, we also have the ability to reveal truth."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Truth is a close relative of light, you might even say that they are one and the same. Without light, we stumble in the unknown. With light, we can see, learn, and interact with the world around us. Light illuminates truth."

Jak was interested, but she still didn't understand what this had to do with her or Naem. She said as much and Yewin paused a second time as he searched for the right words.

"We are able to perceive truth around us. For example, everyone here has seen that you are no ordinary human. We don't know exactly what that means, but I know you will be important in the coming years."

Jak bowed her head. So that would explain why all of them kept staring at her strangely. But what, exactly, was so special about her?

Yewin continued. "We still do not understand all of our abilities yet, but we feel them almost like instinct."

Jak nodded, "My...the Shadow Fae said the same thing. It came to them naturally."

That seemed to interest some of the Bright Fae, who turned and began whispering to each other. Yewin only nodded and said, "Indeed, well that is how I know that I can somehow impart our ability to perceive truth to you, at least temporarily. We can connect and you will be able to see your path ahead of you. And if there is a way for you to save your friend, you will know it."

"And why can't you see those truths yourselves? Why do you need to help me see them?"

“We can only see our path clearly, not that of another. All else is vague. But from the moment I saw you, I knew I needed to help you. The others saw it too, even those who remain distrustful of others.” He glanced at a few of the other Bright Fae, before turning back to Jak. “I know now that this is the only way to save the life of your friend. That much is clear. But I must warn you. I am acting on instinct. I have never done this before, and I do not know the risks. I simply know it can be done. The choice is yours.”

Well, it was a strange request, but if it would help Naem, if it even had a chance of doing so, then Jak didn’t need to think about it. “I’ll do it,” she said.

“Very well. Stand here, by the table.”

Jak did as instructed, moving beside the table Naem lay on. She could only barely make out the rise and fall of his chest. Sweat beaded on his pale face.

“I will stand behind you and try to initiate the connection.” Yewin said. Jak could see her own shadow as the Bright Fae stood behind her. Then she felt hands rest on her shoulders. The hands were warm, like sunlight on a summer’s day.

Jak braced herself for...whatever was about to happen. Several heartbeats passed, and she felt nothing. She was about to say something when...

The world exploded around her. Suddenly, she could see...everything! It was like she stood in a far away place, standing in front of an ocean of knowledge. She could see light and stars, she could see the blue and green sphere upon which they lived. Funny, she had never really thought of her home as a ball suspended in nothingness. She could see far and near simultaneously. While conscious of the massive orb she stood on, she was also conscious of the people that surrounded her. Fae. Elves. A new natural order. She knew now, without any doubt, that the Fae were not demons. All doubts seeded by Kuldain disappeared instantly. The Fae were as native to the planet as she was. Predicted to come forth in their natural order. She saw their magnificence, their splendor. It was beautiful!

Tears coursed down her cheeks. Yewin was saying something, but she chose not to hear it. What she saw was too marvelous, too beautiful to comprehend. She could see the guiding hand behind it all, and its angels. But she was also vaguely aware of something dark hovering at the edge of her awareness. Like a biting fly in paradise. Jak found herself turning away from it, turning away from the dark truth.

A thought came to her, a memory. She was supposed to do something here, in this ocean of truth. She was here to learn. What

was it? Why did she come here?

No sooner had she asked the question, then she was given the answer. Naem! She was here to save Naem. But how?

Again, the answer came swiftly to her mind. There was a way to save him, but it was not what she expected. Doubt entered, and she almost slipped away from this great reservoir of light and truth. But no, she knew that if she saw it here, it was true. She was capable.

In the room, nothing seemed to happen. All remained as it was. Naem lay, still unconscious, on the wooden table. All was as calm as the moment before Yewin began the connection with Jak.

Then white light exploded from her eyes as well as the brand on her left hand. Light so bright, it even caused the Bright Fae to shield their eyes. It continued for seconds or hours, filling every corner of the room, seeming even to push past the so-called boundaries of matter. Jak clutched at the form in front of her, her hand connecting with Naem's.

Just as suddenly as it appeared, the light faded. Jak instantly collapsed to the stone floor. All strength was gone. It took her a moment to realize that Yewin had collapsed as well, his natural light faded somewhat. The others quickly surrounded him, lifting him up and forgetting about Jak. They sat him down in a nearby chair.

Summoning all her remaining strength, Jak rose to her feet. "What happened?" she asked Yewin.

"I don't know," the Bright Fae said. His speech sounded slurred and tired. "Suddenly all my energy was gone, drained through you. If you hadn't stopped when you did, I'm not sure I could have held on." He still held a slight glow, but it was considerably fainter than his comrades.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know this would hurt you."

"Nor did I, I knew there was risk, but I never considered that risk was to myself. But it seems like you did something."

Jak turned to face Naem. He was still lying there on the table, but something was different. His face seemed to have more color. His leg, though still gruesome, looked less swollen.

But it was Naem's left hand that caught Jak's attention. New lines had formed. Extending above his brand of Grace, further up his arm. There, she saw two new brands embedded into his skin. Jak quickly identified them as Toughness and Healing. The former made the user more resilient, the second allowed him to heal faster.

What had she done? No one could live with more than one brand. They either died or became a demon. And yet, Naem was still very much alive, and with no signs of transformation. His chest rose smoothly with each breath, and he seemed at peace.

She could hear the others whispering, marvelling at what they

were seeing. Yewin was smiling, tired as he was in his chair. Light bounced around the cottage as the Bright Fae realized what had happened.

Naem had just become the first person to possess more than one stable brand.

And somehow, Jak had been the one to gift them.

When she awoke the next morning, she was ravenously

hungry. She had eaten nothing the day before, and only went to sleep because she had been more tired than hungry. Now, however, she was ready to eat a whole sheep if she got the opportunity.

It took a moment for her to get out of bed and take in her surroundings. Her body ached all over from the arduous journey the day before, and she barely remembered climbing into bed. Thinking back brought the memory of what she had done. She honestly didn't know what to think about it. Though a part of her now wanted to check Naem to make sure he was still human and hadn't turned into a demon.

She opened the door to the small room, and was greeted by several glowing faces. Blinking her eyes against the light, she eventually made out Yewin, whose light still looked faded, but better than it had been the night before. The others were all looking at her, the concern and caution still evident on their faces. But Jak shrugged that off the moment she saw...

"Naem!" she exclaimed and rushed to embrace him. He was sitting at the table eating breakfast and looking better than ever. He stood, and as she wrapped her arms around him, she felt his arms gingerly return the embrace, and they stood that way for a long while.

When they parted, Naem spoke, "You're looking good."

"Me, you're the one who almost died!"

"Yeah, well, you did all the work to get me here and probably needed that rest more than I did."

Well, she had done all the work. Points to Naem for recognizing that.

"How long have you been up?"

"Not long, maybe an hour before you. Though I admit I received a rather peculiar shock when I opened my eyes and realized I was surrounded by these guys." He indicated the Bright Fae. "They looked like angels. I thought I had died and gone to heaven."

Jak laughed. The thought of angels reminded her of something she

had seen when Yewin had connected with her. But now as she thought of it, she couldn't remember what it was. In fact, she could hardly remember anything that she saw last night.

"Dig in!" Naem said, indicating the food. There was a large bowl of soup and some potatoes. Jak did not need telling twice. She loaded up a bowl and tore into the food like no one was watching.

They sat in silence at the table, the only sounds were of Jak and Naem enjoying their food. The Bright Fae said nothing yet, but Jak could tell they were anxious. They were patiently waiting a turn to speak.

Eventually, Naem broke the silence. "We need to talk about what happened last night."

Jak didn't really want to discuss it. Just thinking about it made her head hurt. But she couldn't deny Naem this. "Okay, what do you want to know?"

Naem lifted his sleeve to reveal the two extra brands located there. "As far as I know, I haven't transformed into a demon. And they're working too. I can feel the Healing brand making me stronger by the hour. How did you do it, Jak?"

Jak honestly did not know. It had seemed clear at the time, but now, thinking back to that moment, it was like trying to remember a star that you wished on as a child.

"She looked into Truth, and found the answer there." Yewin spoke from his chair in a corner. "But even we are not sure how it was done. One of our number was a Gifter before our transformation, and she cannot say why it worked. Almost everything has been tried to imprint more than a single brand on an object, but with no results. What you did, should not have been possible.

Jak shook her head. "I knew so much when we were connected, but I can't remember any of it. Just a few images and impressions."

"It is as we suspected," continued Yewin. "There is something unique about you."

"Oh, there's nothing special about me. I'm sure any Gifter could have done the same while connected to you."

"Perhaps, but perhaps not."

"If you wanted to connect with me again, maybe I could find the answer." She offered.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible." He shook his head. "The act of connecting with you nearly killed me. It drained me of all energy. A second attempt surely would kill me, and I don't think my comrades are particularly eager to try."

Jak nodded, but she would have to find a way to make that connection again. Someday. There was too much knowledge there for her to pass up. And if she could somehow discover how she had added



multiple brands to Naem's arm, it would revolutionize the entire Kingdom. It would allow for the development of super soldiers that would change everything about warfare, regulations would likely come to keep people from becoming too powerful, it could spark revolutions. Relics, but she needed her journal right now. She wondered where it was. Had someone kept it for her, or had Kuldain simply tossed it away. That thought made her shiver.

Yewin continued speaking, "But all of us are curious to know what your story is. Just who exactly have we invited into our...temporary living quarters." He indicated the abandoned cottage.

Jak nodded and began to tell the Bright Fae everything. The Fae gathered around, listening intently to every word. She started at the beginning, with the demon attack on Riverbrook. Naem would occasionally chime in with an added detail, or to tell his side of the story for when Jak had been lost in the mountains. But he also listened very carefully when Jak described her time in the caves. That part seemed to interest everyone more than the rest. The Bright Fae asked countless questions about their cousins in the mountains. Jak shared all she had learned, about the copy of the Annals of Adam that the Shadow Fae had found, how it had changed them into what they were. This seemed to interest Yewin, who informed her that there was no such Relic that had changed them. Their transformation had been spontaneous and recent.

"So Kuldain took my mother and one of the other Shadow Fae and killed the rest. Naem and I managed to escape and came down the mountain as fast as we could looking for help. And that's when I found you," she said to Yewin. "You know the rest."

"So this band of Watchers, they should be arriving here soon, yes?"

"They probably have another day's march at least," said Naem. "But yes, they'll be here soon."

Several of the Fae frowned and glanced at each other. Jak saw their discomfort but asked, "We will need to find a way to free my mother and Vander once they arrive. Anything you can do to help would be wonderful."

The Fae stirred, and Yewin paused for an uncomfortable silence. "We do not trust your Colonel Kuldain. We have had dealings with him before. If he even knew we were here, he would hunt us down and kill us."

"What exactly happened between you and him?" Naem asked. "We've heard his story. He claims that he found you in an abandoned town, that you had killed everyone there. And that you nearly killed him and all his men."

Yewin chuckled solemnly. "Well the town was certainly abandoned by humans, because we had all become Fae. The entire town changed,

hundreds of us. When Kuldain and his men arrived, he accused us of murdering the villagers. He did not understand that we *were* the villagers. Somehow he convinced his men to attack us, claiming that we were demons.”

Naem nodded. “He gave the same speech to all of us.”

“Yes, well we fought back, but there wasn’t much we could do. Most of us...died on their spears.” Jak saw the anguish on his face, and a silver tear began dropping down his lightened face.

But he continued. “The twelve of us were the only ones to escape. We were spared by a few of the Watchers who felt guilty about the slaughter. I guess when we couldn’t fight back, many of them questioned Kuldain’s insistence that we were demons.”

Something didn’t add up for Jak. “But then, how did his men die, if you didn’t kill them?”

“I do not know. Kuldain is hiding something. But what? Who can say. There is a lot we don’t understand. And now with a demon army on the horizon.”

“Wait, what?” Jak and Naem said together.

“Ah yes, I forgot that we haven’t told you that yet. We thought it best not to disturb you further after everything that happened last night. Yes, there’s an army of demons waiting just a few miles outside of the stronghold.”

“But demons don’t have armies, they travel in small packs, like wolves,” Naem countered. “I’m not even sure there are enough of them to make a whole army.”

“As for that, we are convinced that someone has intentionally been building an army for years, possibly decades. There have always been reports of people going missing, but in small enough quantities that the queen and her Lords don’t take notice. Travelers, beggars, people most others don’t miss.”

“It’s not safe outside of our cities, people know that,” Jak countered, though the words felt hollow to her.

“I’m from the other side of the mountains,” another of the Bright Fae spoke up, one that Jak hadn’t heard speak before. He did indeed have an accent Jak had never heard before. His vowels were longer. Jak would have to talk to him later, once she got her journal back, and record what he knew. “And yes, people still go missing there too, but with far less frequency than I see here. It seems the most dangerous profession a man can have is to be a beggar. They, especially, disappear without notice and most do not care because they had no attachments to him.”

If someone was forming an army, then who? Immediately, Kuldain’s face floated in her memory. It might explain some things about his story, such as the disappearance of his band in the north.

But even he wouldn't be that evil, would he? And besides, he wasn't a Gifter, so how could he create a demon army? At least, not on his own.

Thoughts of a rogue Gifter brought up another image for Jak. What had ever happened to Gabriel, the Gifter that had given Jak her brand. He had disappeared after the demon attack, and Jak hadn't heard anything about him since. Could he be behind all of this?

"But we'll achieve nothing in speculation," Yewin brought the conversation around. "The point is, there is a demon army at our doorstep, and we have no way of fighting them. Our powers do not give us any advantage over them."

A thought occurred to Jak, but she tucked it away for a later time. "I want to see it," she said instead. "It's not that I doubt you, but I want to see with my own eyes what we're up against."

Yewin nodded. He glanced at one of the other Fae, the one with the accent. "Urial, take her with you." Then glancing back at Jak, he added, "Your armor was cleaned and stored beside your bed."

The Fae, Urial, waved Jak along. Jak finished her breakfast hastily, then rose, found her armor, and was ready to go within minutes. Naem also wanted to go, but when he rose, he winced in pain. The cut on his leg had mostly healed, but he still needed rest. On Jak's insistence, he agreed to stay.

Jak walked with Urial for several minutes without talking. She enjoyed walking along the foothills, able to see for miles down the plains, though she still couldn't make out any army. Finally she decided to break the ice with Urial. "So, what's it like beyond the mountains? I've only heard rumors of the people there."

"It is very different," he said. "We do not have a queen as you do. We have judges, rulers who meet together to decide the fate of the land. No one person can be trusted with so much power."

"So why did you come here, to our country?"

"I was curious. I had heard of people in this place who had strange powers we did not know of."

"Wait, your people don't have brands?"

"We did not, until recently, when trade opened between our peoples. That is how I arrived, with the caravan. But I ran away from my people in search of adventure." He said it with some sadness. "I think I would have been better off to stay. Most of your people didn't trust my kind anyway. We're too different. In culture and appearance."

"Why would that matter?" Jak asked. "That has nothing to do with how dangerous you are."

"In my experience, most people are not as perceiving as you. They see one thing they don't understand, and they fear it, naturally

associating that fear with other fears. Now that I have become one of the Fae, it seems people fear me even more.”

“I hope we can change that. I promised my mother that I would do everything I could to find acceptance for them among my people.”

Urial smiled at her. “I am glad to see that not everyone shares the same primal fears.”

“I mean, I was scared at first, but that was before I understood more about you. That’s all I need to do, I just need to help the others learn, to show them that you’re here to help, not to harm. Because that’s what helped me.”

“I pray it is that simple.”

At that moment, as they crested a hill, Urial ducked down low. Jak followed suit. He said nothing more but pointed ahead. Jak crawled forward, following the direction he indicated, until she saw it ahead in a nook created by two foothills coming together.

A demon army.

It was like nothing she had ever seen before. Her last encounters with the demons had been in relatively small packs, no more than a few dozen. But there must have been hundreds, perhaps thousands of demons in the field in front of her. She watched them carefully. Thankfully, none of them had seen her or Urial, who was inching backwards to keep his glow from being seen. As Jak watched, she noticed that none of the demons seemed to be moving, or at least, not like she was used to seeing. They crouched on all fours, and their heads moved, violently back and forth, but their bodies were still as statues. What an odd sight. It was as though something was actively keeping them from rushing forward.

Jak watched for a while, taking in the numbers and this new behavior from demons. Of one thing she was sure, her people thought they knew about demons, but now she realized that they didn’t know anything.

Finally, she crawled backwards down the hill until she met up with Urial, and the two began to make their way back to the cottage.

“They’re waiting for something,” Jak said once they were far enough away. “They’re just standing there.”

“Yes, that was our assessment as well. But we do not know what they are waiting for. If they had attacked when they first arrived, it would not have given the farmers and soldiers time to barricade themselves in the fortress.”

“Did the army arrive before or after you did?”

“Before. We saw them on our way here, and went to the stronghold to see if we could help. But they assumed we were somehow connected, possibly leading the demon army, and they nearly killed us when we approached. We haven’t tried to contact

them since.”

When they arrived back at the cottage, Naem and Yewin were waiting for them. Naem was standing, Jak was glad to see, though he still had a slight limp as he walked out to greet them.

“Is it true?” he asked. “How many?”

Jak nodded, “I’d say about four-thousand.”

Naem grimaced. “That’s about twenty to one, more than enough to take over the small garrison here at Foothold. They only attack small bands of demons to protect merchants traveling from here to Tradehall. Until now, there hasn’t been a reason for any stronger army.”

“Well, there is now. But what can we do? I suppose you and I could try to talk to them. When they see that the Bright Fae have left us alive, perhaps they’ll realize that they are harmless and will accept our help.”

Naem shook his head. “I don’t think that will be possible.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” Naem rubbed the back of his head with one hand. “While you were gone, Kuldain arrived with the band. They’re in the stronghold now.”

Jak, Naem, and the others spent the next day planning what they were going to do next. Yewin made it clear that he was not about to try the truth connection with Jak again. Doing so had nearly cost him his life, and Yewin's own intuition for truth told him that if he tried again, it would kill him. Perhaps that's just the way it worked. So they were left on their own to figure out their next steps.

For Jak, there was only one objective, get into the stronghold and rescue her mother. Nothing else mattered. She had quickly shot down Naem's suggestion that they just leave and try to find help. They had no idea if help was available anywhere nearby, and she certainly wasn't going to abandon the Shadow Fae, or the Bright Fae for that matter, to Kuldain's devices or to the demon army.

So the plan quickly turned to, how could they get inside Foothold, sneak past the Watchers, and rescue the Shadow Fae without being seen.

"Well, I've only been to Foothold once, but if I recall, there's one area where we could get in and out of the moat on our own," Naem said. "But I still have no idea how to get into the stronghold once we get into the moat. We can't scale the wall, we can't jump over it, and we can't go through it."

"So basically, you can get us to the wall, but no further?" Jak clarified.

"Yes, so it really does us no good at all."

"I don't know, we just need to take this one step at a time." Jak ran a hand over her mouth. Turning to the Fae, she asked, "I don't suppose your people have any abilities that could help?"

Yewin, who was sitting in his corner like he had for the past few days answered, "I'm afraid not. Our powers are limited, we have no aggressive abilities. Nothing that would help you break into Foothold."

"What about a distraction? They seem to fear you, maybe you could keep them occupied while we sneak in?"

Yewin glanced at the others with uncertainty. "I'm afraid, we can't

do that either.”

“Why not?”

“Our encounter with your Colonel Kuldain still haunts us. He and the other Watchers beyond the wall will surely kill us if we get too close. More likely they will hunt us down one by one. I’m sorry, but while Kuldain is here, we need to stay hidden.”

“But the other Watchers have almost certainly told Kuldain about you. He knows you’re near.”

“All the more reason not to present him with any added knowledge of our whereabouts. They don’t know where we are, so we won’t give him any reason to find out.”

Jak pulled on her strand of red hair. The Fae could have been an effective distraction, and now they had to figure out a better way of sneaking around the Watchers once they got inside, not to mention entering in the first place.

Naem was thinking the same thing, “One problem at a time. We still have to get into the stronghold before we can worry about a distraction.”

Jak tapped her mouth with one finger. “What if we could go through the wall?” she said eventually.

Naem glanced at her, “I don’t follow.”

“Well, with my Gifter brand I’ve managed to make rocks explode by using the Flamedancer brand on them.”

Naem nodded. “The same way you burned the ropes that bound your hands. Of course!” But his face fell as soon as the words were out of his mouth. “But that would wake up everyone from here to Tradehall. Anyone inside would come running.”

“But if we were down at the base of the fortress, in the moat itself, wouldn’t that be far enough away from most people? What’s on the other side of the wall in that area anyway?”

“A wine cellar I think,” Naem said. “It could work, but punching a hole in the wall, no matter where we do it, is going to be loud. We can’t count on nobody hearing it.”

“It sounds like our best bet at this point.”

Naem nodded in spite of himself. “I agree, I can think of no other way to get in. Are you sure you can still do it? You branded me correctly.” He lifted his arm. “Who’s to say you might actually get the Flamedancer brand right?”

Jak hadn’t thought of that. But surely if she could do it right, she could still do it wrong, right?

“Why don’t we give it a test?” She rose to go outside. Naem followed her. Once in the open air, Jak bent to pick up a pebble. Frowning in concentration, she willed the Flamedancer brand to appear on the pebble and thought of a truth to activate her gift, *I’m*

*still not too good at this.* The brand in her left hand turned white as the Flamedancer brand settled into the pebble. She quickly threw it as far as she could. It exploded in mid-air. Jak grimaced. No matter how useful this defective brand was, she always felt disappointed that she couldn't get it right. A part of her had been hoping that she could do it after what she did to Naem. But without the aid of the Bright Fae, it looked like she still couldn't successfully place a brand. Just what was she getting wrong about the brand anyway?

"Well there you go," she said. "It still works. Or doesn't, I mean."

"Well, that looks like the best plan we have. I say we do it." Naem actually looked excited. His leg had almost fully healed, fast even for someone with a Healing brand. Perhaps it was the combination of Healing plus Toughness that made him stronger, faster. No one had ever had more than one brand, so there was no data on whether the two could somehow compound healing.

Jak shook herself out of her thoughts and nodded. "Alright, we'll do it. Let's get everything we need."

They spent the next few hours gathering all the supplies they thought they would need. They each dressed in their leather armor and gathered some farm tools to be used as weapons. That was all they had at the moment, since Jak and Naem had left the rest of their armor and weapons with Kuldain's band. The Bright Fae made them food, and they filled up before leaving. They were going to need the energy.

Then, once dusk began to spread, they set out. Even if their entrance woke everyone from here to Tradehall, at least they could do it in darkness.

As they walked back to Foothold, Naem spoke, "I haven't really had a chance to thank you for everything. Not just the brands, but everything. Getting me down the mountain, and actually building a boat to get us to Foothold. That was amazing."

"It was nothing," Jak answered. She was keeping her gaze fixed ahead of her. Something about high praise seemed to bother her, though she couldn't understand why.

"It was definitely something." Naem went on. "I've thought it through, and no matter how I look at it, I'm pretty sure I would have died without you. Kuldain wasn't going to help. And if I had escaped on my own, there's no way I could have made it past the snow. You got me through all that."

Jak felt his hand grab hers as they walked. A gesture of gratitude, or maybe something more. "You're welcome," she finally said. She wanted to say 'you...helped me out too, when I needed it most. You gave me something to focus on while I was dealing with the loss of my father. You supported me as my mother was taken away from me too.



All of that, and I couldn't just let you die. I would have done anything to keep that from happening.' But she said none of it, and instead just let the moment stretch.

She felt him squeeze her hand, but he finally let go, his fingers lingering on hers. Jak could feel the slight disappointment as his hand left, but they were nearly at the stronghold. She had other things to think about.

When they finally arrived, Naem took her away from the front entrance to Foothold, along the right side until they arrived at an area where the land sloped into the moat. Strapping their things along their back, they proceeded to wade into the water until they couldn't feel the ground beneath their feet.

It was colder than Jak expected, probably because it came from the mountain river. Her legs prickled with the cold. Soon enough, they were at the wall, close enough to touch the stones that made up its rocky edifice.

Treading water, they paused to listen, trying to hear anything that would indicate someone nearby, either on the roof or through the wall itself. They could hear nothing.

"Okay, here goes nothing," Jak said, taking a deep breath. Naem retreated a safe distance away as Jak laid her fingers against one of the larger stones above the water line. She hoped the whole wall didn't come crumbling down once she did this.

Then, she activated her brand.

Black lines resembling a Flamedancer brand settled into the stone. As soon as her magic faded, the stone itself began to glow, and Jak could hear the faint whining noise she had heard earlier when trying to shape the oak canoe.

Jak dashed out of the way, throwing herself into the water and swimming for all she was worth. The water slowed her progress. Could she get out of the way in time?

She heard a muffled boom as the stone exploded behind her, and almost screamed as small pebbles and debris fell on and around her. But a few seconds later it was over. A large gaping hole stood in the side of the wall. Not large, but big enough for the two of them to squeeze through.

Naem was already at the opening, doing his best to climb in. "We have to move fast," he whispered. "Someone probably heard that."

Jak quickly followed. Being the smaller of the two, she had an easier time squeezing through the hole, but it was still a tight fit, especially given the width of the wall, which made the hole narrower the further they went in. But with some helpful pushes and pulls, she and Naem managed to find themselves on the other side of the wall.

There was virtually no light to see by, but as she felt around she

realized that Naem had been right about a wine cellar. There were large barrels lining the walls.

“Okay, I think I know where we are,” said Naem out of the darkness. “Just follow me.”

Easier said than done when the only light they had was the faint moonlight coming through the crack they had opened. But Jak put her arms forward to feel ahead of her and followed Naem’s voice.

Both of them froze as they heard the thud of footsteps above them.

The sound grew closer and Jak’s heart nearly stopped as she heard the creak of hinges and saw the flickering light of a lit torch.

The light was just bright enough that she could see where they were. Long walls of wine barrels divided the room, and she quickly dodged behind one of them. She could see Naem, a little ahead of her, do the same.

“How did you not hear that?” a voice came from the direction of the light. “I swear it practically shook the building.”

“You’re paranoid, Hal,” came a lower, gruffer voice. “All them demons outside have you spooked.”

Two figures entered the cellar. One, Hal, held the torch and stared around suspiciously once he arrived on the cellar floor. The other followed, wearing a bored expression.

“Broken brands!” exclaimed Hal. “I told you there was something wrong!” He had found the opening.

“I...I don’t. Who do you reckon did that?”

“I don’t know, but we need to tell the Watchers about this.”

Jak felt ice in her stomach. If Kuldain found out about this, they were finished. He’d scour the place until they were found.

“Hey,” said the second man. “You don’t suppose whoever did that is still around?”

That brought Jak back to reality. The two men stood in silence for a time, looking around nervously.

“I’m getting out of here,” said Hal. He made a move for the open door. The second man followed. But before the two of them could cross the distance, Naem was there. He brandished the butt of a pitchfork they had brought with them, which connected with Hal’s head before he could utter a word.

“What the...” said the second man, before he too received a blow to the head. Jak silently thanked the Holy Relics for giving Naem the brand of Grace, which had allowed him to incapacitate the two men with speed and fluidity.

The torch now lay on the floor next to the two men. Naem bent to pick it up.

“Let’s make sure these two stay put,” he said.

Jak nodded, searching in her pack for some rope they had brought

with them. They hadn't known if they would need it, but she was glad they did.

After tying the two together, they tiptoed outside the door. No one was around, so they continued until they found the exit to the building. Naem peeked outside, then waved Jak forward, indicating the coast was clear.

Outside, they could make out the general layout of the stronghold. The large tower loomed to their left, still a fair distance away. They stood among one of several oblong buildings, most of which were probably barracks for the Watchers or anyone else staying the night. Jak could see people going to and fro between the buildings. With all the local farmers from outside the wall, now inside, Foothold was probably crowded.

"Come," said Naem. "Chances are the Shadow Fae are holed up in the tower."

"What about all the people?" Jak asked, indicating the nearest street where several persons were walking one way or the other.

"I think we should be fine in the dark. They'll just take us for other Watchers. We only have to worry about it if one of our own band recognizes us, and they'd have to get a good look to do so."

That made sense, so Jak followed Naem into the street, trying to look like they belonged.

They saw the occasional Watcher, but no one spared them a second glance. Within a few minutes, they had closed most of the distance between them and the tower. Jak felt her hope lag as they approached. The tower was surrounded by Watchers, and the walls held multiple torches, as did several of the guards. At the base of the tower, there was a well-lit room. Jak could make out two or three people inside, talking. Was Kuldain in there? Or Skellig? She thought she could make out the Colonel's tall form, but it was impossible to tell.

"We're going to need a distraction," Naem said, one hand on his chin. "There's no way we'll get in there without someone seeing us."

Jak agreed, "I suppose I could make some rocks explode."

Naem thought about it, but shook his head. "No, you wouldn't be able to get away in time. Someone would see you throwing them, and Kuldain would probably be on you in a second."

"Do we have much choice?" she asked.

"Just let me think," Naem responded.

"Jak?"

The two of them whirled to see who had spoken behind them, Jak's heart catching in her throat. A dark figure stood there, but it only took a moment for Jak to recognize the form.

"Marek?" she asked, inching forward.

"It is you?" the voice said, and Marek moved closer. It was him! "What are you two doing here? Kuldain was furious when you left, he'll skin you alive if he finds out you're here. He even ordered a complete search of the fortress when we first arrived. Just in case you had gotten in somehow."

"We tried, but they wouldn't let us in. It's a long story." Jak said. "We're here to rescue the Fae."

Marek frowned. "Why? Aren't they dangerous?"

"Not unless provoked."

"Well then I think they might be dangerous." Marek said.

"Look, we just want to get them out," Naem added. "We promise we won't let them harm anyone."

Marek looked from Naem to Jak. "Is that true?" he asked her. "Can you promise they won't hurt anyone?"

Jak nodded. "I'm sure they're as eager to get away without a fight as we are." She wasn't so sure that her mother wouldn't attack Kuldain if given a chance, but she was sure her mother wasn't a murderer. She wouldn't kill the other Watchers out of spite.

Marek nodded, "Well the Fae are being held in the basement of the tower. That's where the holding cells are. But you'll have a hard time getting in there. Kuldain has the place well guarded."

"Is there anything you could do to distract them or lead them away?"

"They have orders not to leave their posts, even under the most serious of circumstances."

"Isn't there anything you can do?"

Marek sighed, and muttered, "I can't believe I'm doing this," under his breath. Looking Jak in the eye, he added. "You know I'm only helping you because you're my closest friend, right? You understand the danger this puts me in."

Jak did understand, and she hated herself for it. "I'm sorry, Marek. We can find another way."

"No, it's alright. I just wanted to make sure you understand how serious this is. It so happens, I'm on my way to relieve the guard at the door. There are other guards inside, but perhaps, between the three of us, we might be able to take them down silently. How's your stealth?"

Naem looked at him like he was slow, "I have Grace," he said, as though that explained everything. And indeed it did. Grace always aided stealth.

Marek nodded. "Okay, once I'm in position, I'll let you inside. Try not to be seen by anyone else. Kuldain's in that tower."

Naem nodded. "How many are guarding the holding cells?"

"Usually about four or five. And they all have powerful brands."

Naem cursed. "I'm not sure I can take out that many. Especially if any of them have Grace or Telekinesis."

"I'll see if I can come in and distract them. You can sneak around and take out the most powerful, hopefully before anyone sees you."

"And what about me?" Jak asked. She was not about to let these two rescue her mother without her.

Marek hesitated. "Ah, well we'll probably need someone on the lookout while I'm inside. Someone might notice I'm not at my post."

Jak didn't like that idea. She wanted to be inside to make sure her mother and Vander were okay.

Naem rubbed his neck. "It's not a very good plan. If even one of them sees me, it's all over."

"Do you have any better ideas?"

"No, but I..." Naem broke off. Jak turned and saw what had caught his eye. A Watcher was running as fast as he could towards the tower. The other Watchers stiffened as he approached, but after a few moments of conversation that Jak couldn't overhear, they let him into the well-lit room on the first floor of the tower.

"Oh no," Naem said, and Jak had a sinking feeling that she knew what Naem was thinking. Had their escape been compromised?

Moments later, and the Watcher returned, running again in the direction he came. He was followed by several figures. Jak and Naem hid themselves in the shadows as they drew near. Among the figures were Kuldain and Skellig, and they ran following the messenger.

In the direction of the wine cellar.

Jak groaned. The cellar had to be their destination.

Someone had found the two men they had tied up. Someone had found the hole in the wall.

Their only escape was now gone.

**T**he three of them looked at each other. “What is it?” Marek

asked, seeing the looks on Jak and Naem’s faces.

“I think they just found the way we came in, and our only way out,” Naem said, his face numb.

Jak didn’t want to think about it. It was one stressful event too many. She needed to focus on something she *could* do. “Regardless,” she began, “Now is our best chance to rescue my mother with Kuldain and the others gone.”

“There will still be guards in the dungeons,” Marek clarified.

“Yes, but now we don’t have to worry about them alerting Kuldain. The plan hasn’t changed.”

Naem nodded, “If we’re going to do this, we’d best get started.”

Marek returned the nod. “Very well, give me a moment.”

He left them to march up to the guard standing at the door to the lower levels of the tower. After a moment’s exchange, the guard left and began walking towards the barracks. Probably on his way to enjoy a night’s rest. Though Jak wasn’t sure anyone in this place would get much rest tonight, not if someone noticed what they were doing.

Once the guard had crossed the courtyard and disappeared, they walked up to Marek.

“Okay, Naem, I’ll go in first and try to distract the guards inside. You come in behind me and pretend you’re just another guard.”

“Will any of them recognize me?” Naem asked.

“Probably, but maybe not in the dark.”

“I’m going with you,” said Jak.

Marek paused. “I’m not sure that’s such a good idea.”

“You’re not going to stop me on this one, Marek. I’ll stay just out of sight and join in once the fighting starts. You’ll have a better advantage that way.”

Marek still didn’t look like he liked the idea, but at a nod from Naem he finally consented. “Okay, but just stay far enough away that they won’t see you.”

Jak agreed and the three of them entered the archway to the lower levels. It didn't take long before they couldn't see in the darkness. They had no torch, so they simply felt along the walls until a light began to be visible ahead of them, torch light.

The light grew as they neared, and Jak knew they must be approaching the holding cells. It was cold, and the hard stone walls and floor were damp with moisture. And something smelled.

"Ho there," Marek called out as they approached.

Someone greeted him and Jak could hear a soft conversation. She stayed far enough back, as they had agreed, so she couldn't overhear the echoes of what they were saying.

Suddenly, someone call out, boots scraped across the floor and metal clanged. The fight had started!

She rushed forward and around a corner to see Naem and Marek trying to fight the guards. One was already on the ground, but there were at least five more, and they were highly skilled. Naem seemed to be fighting another Watcher with Grace, and while Naem now had Toughness and Healing, that didn't help much in combat. They were evenly matched. Marek couldn't get close to the man he was fighting, a Flamedancer. It was all he could do to stay out of the path of the guard's flames.

Jak almost forgot about the fight as she noticed the cell doors behind them. In it were two dark forms, lying on the ground. They did not look good.

Rushing into the battle, Jak took a torch off the wall and jabbed it into the face and hair of the Flamedancer before he even noticed she was there. He yelled in shock, having been too focused on Marek to notice her. That was just enough distraction for Marek to hit the man in the head with the butt of his spear. Jak moved on to the next guard, a woman. This one was not unprepared, as she took a stance facing both Marek and Jak. Jak glanced at her left hand to see the Brand there. Strength. Well, not as bad as Flamedancing, Grace, or Telekinesis, but still a challenge.

Just then, the guard covered her eyes. "What's going on? Don't put out the torches!"

Jak glanced at Marek. The torches were just fine, still hanging on the wall. At that moment, Naem connected a blow to the head of the guard he fought. The soldier crumpled at his feet. That left three more, but all three of them were not making any moves. They each had their hands out, trying to feel their surroundings as if they couldn't see. One had his fists up in a protective gesture, but he wasn't looking at them. He looked one way, then another.

Why couldn't the guards see them? Oh, of course.

Naem and Marek paused only a moment longer before taking their

spears and knocking each of the guards across the head. Each one fell, stone-cold, to the floor.

“What just happened?” Marek asked. His hands were held out to each side, as if ready to catch himself should he too go blind.

“I think I know.” Jak said, and pointed to the cell. Karlona, her mother, was standing. She looked like a void of light, almost so dark that Jak couldn’t tell it was her. But she knew it was.

“Get...us...out of here,” her mother intoned, voice weak and shaking.

Jak didn’t need to be told twice. “Where are the keys?”

They each searched the six guards in the room, but found no keys. “Maybe Kuldain or one of the others keeps them?” Marek offered. They hadn’t thought about this obstacle.

“Okay, we’ll try the other way,” said Jak.

“What other way?”

Jak answered by grasping hold of the metal lock and willing her brand to activate. “Stand back!” she shouted as the block of metal began to glow white hot. But instead of exploding like the stones had done, it simply melted in place, forming a shining pool on the floor. Everyone quickly stepped back from the fiery puddle. But Jak gave a solid tug on the cell door and it came loose.

Marek and Naem helped Karlona and Vander to their feet. Both seemed barely able to move. Upon closer inspection, Jak saw cuts and swollen areas of their faces. They had been beaten, and probably starved.

“We’re going to get you out of here,” she said quietly to her mother.

Her mother’s response was a quick smile and a nod. “I knew you would be back for us.”

“We need to hurry,” Naem said. “If Kuldain found the hole in the wine cellar, he’ll be back here soon to check on them.” He indicated the Shadow Fae.

The rest agreed and they began helping Karlona and Vander exit the dungeon. It took far longer to get out than it had to get in. Karlona was slow, but Vander was barely even conscious enough to move. Once they were in the open air, Marek led them to one side towards the nearest building away from the tower. In the darkness most people that looked at them wouldn’t be able to tell who it was. But they desperately needed to move faster.

It was Naem who spoke the obvious question. “What do we do now?”

“I have an idea about that,” said Jak. “You’re not going to like it.”

She told them her idea, and just as she predicted, they didn’t like it.



“Can’t these two turn invisible or something? Perhaps they could sneak past the guards at the wine cellar and...”

“We don’t have the strength to walk unaided, much less use our magic so freely,” Karlona said. “I used the last of my strength to darken the eyes of the others. Jak’s plan is the only option that I can see.”

That was enough for Naem. “Very well, though this is your fault if we all die,” he said to Jak.

“I’ll take that chance.”

Naem turned to Marek. “The nearest stairs to the wall are that way, yes?” He pointed into the west side of Foothold.

“Yes, it’s not far.”

They began moving the Shadow Fae in that direction, finally rounding a bend that put them out of sight of the tower courtyard. Jak wanted to breathe a sigh of relief, but they weren’t out of this yet. There were still people around, and they wouldn’t be able to walk unseen with two Shadow Fae in tow.

As they entered another side street, they heard the first sounds of a commotion coming from the direction of the tower. A deep voice boomed, and they could hear it even from their distance.

“THE DEMON FAE HAVE ESCAPED!” It was Kuldain’s voice. “BAR ALL THE EXITS! DO NOT LET THEM LEAVE THIS STRONGHOLD.”

Jak, Naem, and the others did their best to move faster. But people were peeking their heads out of windows and doors to hear what all the fuss was about. A few heads turned and saw them limping along.

“Hey!” one woman cried from a two-story window. “I think that’s them right there. Stop them!”

Jak cursed and began moving even faster, all but dragging her mother along with her. Marek was helping Vander, but Naem moved forward to intercept several half-asleep soldiers as they got in their way. Naem danced around them all and soon they were all lying on the ground, still alive, but clutching their heads.

Yet, the damage was done. People were shouting, pointing fingers, and calling for help. Jak thought she could hear Kuldain’s voice growing nearer as he still shouted for the soldiers to mobilize themselves.

Jak could see the stairs leading to the wall up ahead. A few guards were stationed there, but Naem ran forward and took them out before any of them had time to wonder what was going on.

“Come on!” Naem yelled. They hurried up the steps as fast as they could.

Marek turned to Jak as they ran. “I’m assuming it’s fine if I come with you?”

“You think?” Jak shot back. But they said nothing more because

now they were climbing the wall. People were gathering below to watch. Once Jak had reached the top of the wall, she looked down to see soldiers pushing through the growing crowd.

And they were led by Kuldain.

Naem was already throwing his armor and weapons to the ground. He did so with a fluidity and speed that outmatched Marek who was trying to do the same. A moment later, and Naem had grabbed Karlona and Vander. "I'll take them down. They'll be safe if I take the brunt of the fall."

Jak nodded in agreement. She would normally be worried for Naem. But he had Toughness now, and that would probably save him from any potential damage.

Without another word, Naem leapt over the side of the wall, back first, carrying the two Shadow Fae in front of him. Down they fell to the water below.

Soldiers had reached the wall, and Kuldain was growing closer. In that moment, multiple thoughts raced through Jak's mind. Chief among them: Kuldain couldn't be allowed to see where Naem and her mother had gone. Anyone looking down the side of the wall would see them, and would see where they got out of the moat. Any archer could take them down from there.

She was going to need a distraction.

Gritting her teeth, she grabbed Marek who had just removed his breastplate, and shoved him as hard as she could to the edge of the wall. Marek, taken by surprise, only had a moment to protest before he too was tumbling down the wall into the moat.

Now for the hard part. As soldiers crested the side of the wall, she bent down to pick up some stone fragments. Summoning the magic of her brand was coming instinctively to her now, and she threw the stones at the feet of the approaching men. The stones exploded in mid-air, spraying dust and shards of stone into the soldiers. They covered their eyes and stepped back a few steps.

"Kuldain!" she shouted. "I'm the one you want. Come and get me!"

Then, she ran.

If there was one thing she had excelled at on the farm, it was speed. Running across the fields, playing a similar role as their sheep dog, had built her small body into that of a toned runner. And right now, she was full of motivation and energy. She ran for all she was worth.

Further along the wall, she found another stairwell to the wall. But she knew that if she took the time to go down the steps, those on the ground would catch up with her. Kuldain would intercept. Instead, she spotted some ropes and a pulley system to the side of the stairs, probably for easily hoisting food and supplies to the top of the wall.

Jak didn't stop to wonder if the rope would hold her weight. She simply leapt and let the pulley system take her down. She landed hard and tumbled to the ground.

Getting up, a moment's glance told her that Kuldain and some of the others were almost on her. Frantic, she kept running. She knew of only one way out of this place now. She prayed that no one had covered it up.

People were now covering the streets, and Jak had to dodge and weave through the small crowd of villagers and soldiers alike. A few reached out trying to grab her, but she was too quick. She ducked underneath their outstretched arms and kept running.

Within seconds, she was already back at the building that housed the wine cellar. Putting her arms in front of her, she burst through the door.

She was surprised to see Major Skellig inside, who turned and looked at Jak with shock.

"You?" was all she said, but Jak was already running past her down the stairs that led to the cellar. She liked Skellig, and perhaps the Major would help her, but Jak couldn't spare any time to find out.

She briefly heard a deep voice behind her say, "Stay out! I will deal with her myself."

It was Kuldain, he was right on her heels.

Jak kept running down the stairs as fast as she could. Were there this many stairs when they had gone up?

Suddenly, a snarl nearly caused her to come up short. What kind of a noise was that?

But she didn't stop, and yet, she could hear someone, or something, coming up behind her. Fast!

At last she saw the door to the wine cellar in front of her. Gasping for air to save her aching lungs, she pulled open the door and slid it shut behind her.

Three armed men stood inside. They each regarded her silently for a moment. Then all three of them moved to grab her. She was about to try and duck under their reach and somehow reach the hole further on, when something smashed into the door, blowing it completely off its hinges.

"What the...?" was all the lead soldier could say before a huge form barrelled into him. The man screamed as whatever it was tore into his flesh.

Jak stood, horrified at what she was seeing. A huge form feasted on the man, blood shot in all directions. Jak had seen death before, but this was on a level that absolutely petrified her. Yet she managed to retain the good sense to hide behind one of the walls of wine barrels.

This new monster stood hunched over, its face dark, its limbs far longer than a normal human. Its monstrous hands held massive clawed fingers, which right now were tearing into the three guards. Its disproportionately small head held large fangs that gleamed in the firelight. They shone red. This definitely wasn't any kind of demon she'd seen before. Where had it come from? Kuldain had been right behind her. Could it be him somehow? But...how?

Within seconds, all three of the guards were dead, and their screams cut off abruptly. The creature stood silent, making a soft sound. Jak realized with horror that it was sniffing. And it was growing closer. It could smell her!

Trying not to make a sound, she tiptoed to the other end of the wall of wine barrels and moved to the other side, just as the monster crawled around the bend and sniffed the place where she had been standing.

Jak felt herself almost paralyzed with fear. But somehow, miraculously, her brain continued to function. She knew she couldn't go for the exit. That thing would cut her off within seconds, and even if she did make it out, it would follow and overtake her.

She had only one idea, and it would probably get her killed.

Reaching out, she touched a wooden beam that was one of several that held up the roof. Swallowing, she activated her power and infused the beam with her faulty Flamedancer brand. Light burst in the room as the beam caught fire.

The monster turned, the firelight glinting in its beady black eyes. There was something almost familiar about that face, grotesque as it was. Somehow, that monstrous form had to be Kuldain.

But Jak didn't have time to worry about that. She leapt to the other side of the room where another beam stood. Another second, and it too was consumed in flame, a magical flame that turned the wooden beams to ash far faster than a normal fire could.

The beast was snarling and it leapt around the beams to catch her. But she was already running, faster even than before, towards the hole in the side of the wall. Without her armor and weapons, she slid much faster into its opening. But the monster was nearly on her.

Jak heard a crack as the two beams collapsed. The monster must have heard it too, for he paused and looked behind. There was a moment of silence in which Jak held her breath.

Then the roof collapsed, right on top of the new demon. Jak heard it scream as several tons of stone and brick rained on it. Jak didn't wait to see what happened. She pushed herself the last few feet out the hole, some of the falling stones barely missing her head.

Cool water met her next, and she found herself swimming in the moat. A quick glance told her that the hole was now blocked off with

rubble. But she wasn't waiting to find out if the creature had survived or not. Besides, someone might be watching from the wall.

She swam as fast as she could to the edge of the moat and climbed out. She felt the cool night air chill her skin as she began running again. They had designated a spot to meet in case they were separated, a ways off behind one of the nearby hills, a place that would be invisible to anyone in Foothold, unless someone was looking from the tower.

Hearing no signs of pursuit, she slackened her pace somewhat. What had that thing been? It looked a bit like a demon, but much bigger, and less...human looking. Though that wasn't exactly true. Its face looked human, apart from the dark eyes and sharp teeth. She had recognized that face. Kuldain. But how was that even possible?

Jak never had a high opinion of Kuldain, but she hadn't really presumed him to be more than he was, a disgruntled officer with a grudge against Fae. Yet the Bright Fae had warned her that there was more to Kuldain than meets the eye. Perhaps they had been more right than they knew. Perhaps Kuldain really was the threat here, and not Gabriel as Jak had suspected. It made more sense after all. Gabriel had been a kindly old man. How could he possibly command a demon army, much less become something like that monstrosity.

Her only hope now was that the collapsed roof had somehow taken care of the monster.

A part of her knew, however, that was unlikely.

**B**lessedly, Jak caught up with the others in no time. They were

waiting, clothes wet, and all of them looked glad to see Jak. Karlona, despite her weariness, moved forward to hug her daughter as Jak approached.

“We were so worried for you when you didn’t follow. We thought they had taken you. Naem insisted we wait for you here until dawn.”

Jak glanced at Naem and smiled. He grinned and stared at the ground.

“I’m fine,” she said. “But we need to get back, quickly. There’s something new to worry about, and I’ll tell you once we join the others.”

“What others?” asked Marek.

Jak smiled again. “You’ll see.” They were in for a surprise.

It took almost an hour to get back to the small cottage where the Bright Fae had sequestered themselves. That was mostly due to the slow pace that the Shadow Fae took, particularly Vander who was still barely conscious and hadn’t said a word since they broke him out.

As they approached, the door opened, and Yewin appeared. Marek sprang back and reached for a weapon, which of course, wasn’t there.

“What...what is that?” he said, his face paling.

“He’s a Fae, silly,” said Jak. “A Bright Fae, they’re harmless. I’ll explain later.”

Vander raised his head, demonstrating interest for the first time. But still, he said nothing.

Upon seeing their worn and disheveled appearance, Yewin instantly came to help. Jak was glad to see his natural glow was almost back to normal, and his strength returned.

Together, they took the Shadow Fae inside. There, they were greeted by the rest of the Bright Fae. Marek almost looked like he was ready to bolt and run. But he managed to stay in place, stiff as a board.

Yewin ordered some food be brought and they let the two Shadow Fae sit in the high-backed chairs to rest. One of the Bright Fae brought

soup and began helping Karlona and Vander eat. Even in their weakened state, the two responded to the food with ravenous hunger. It would appear that Kuldain *had* starved them.

Jak found another chair across the room and sat down, feeling her own exhaustion settle in. It was good to have a moment of rest. For a few brief moments, she was content to see her mother and Vander receive all the attention they needed. Another Fae came in with a few cushions and gave them to Vander, who took them appreciatively.

"Thank...you," he spoke for the first time, though his voice was hollow and parched.

The Bright Fae nodded and retreated to the kitchen.

Naem was the next to break the silence. "Well, now that we're all here, I imagine we need to catch everyone up." He was looking at Marek when he said that, still standing petrified in one corner.

Yewin nodded. "I agree. Perhaps I should start."

He then went on to explain everything that had happened to his people, the entire village that transformed into shining creatures of light and truth, and the attack that left all but a few of them dead. He told them about their journey here, to find the source of the rumors of Fae in the mountains. Karlona and Vander's eyes were fixed on Yewin as he spoke, listening.

"And that is when we finally met this young lady, and she told us everything that had happened to you." Yewin concluded. Jak noticed that he hadn't mentioned Jak's experience that resulted in Naem's additional brands. She appreciated that. It was a story for another time. Naem also seemed to recognize the emotion, for he absently pulled down one of his sleeves to make sure his brands were covered.

"We never knew for certain that there were others," Karlona spoke. "But the Annals of Adam did promise a dichotomy of light and dark. It seems you are our other half."

Yewin nodded, he had heard about the Annals of Adam from Jak. "One day I would very much like to read that book."

"I'm sure we can arrange it. It should still be safe inside the mountain. But we heard the soldiers talking about a demon army?"

Jak nodded. "Several thousand of them, just holding steady a mile or so outside of the stronghold."

"What do you think they are waiting for?" Karlona asked.

"We don't know," Yewin answered. "Though we think someone might be controlling them somehow, or at least willing them not to attack...yet."

"Is that even possible?" Marek spoke for the first time.

"There's a lot more about demons that we don't know," said Jak. "That reminds me, I have something to tell you."

And she started from the moment she distracted Kuldain and his

men, running into the wine cellar to escape. She told them of the monster that had followed her, and her suspicion that the creature might be Kuldain somehow. Though she still had no idea how that would work.

When she had finished, Yewin was nodding his head. "That might explain why the demon army remains where it is."

"How so?" Jak asked.

"Well, if what you say is true, and this monster was somehow greater than the common demon, not to mention somehow managing to hide among the humans in Foothold, it stands to reason that he might be some kind of...demon Captain, holding the army in line until the opportune moment."

Jak thought about it. That actually made sense. But what purpose would a demon leader have to keep the demons from attacking? What other objective did it have in mind?

Yewin spoke again. "Right now, I think all of you should get some rest. It's likely that someone will come looking for us now, and you'll need all the rest you can get in the meantime. Do not worry, we will keep watch."

Jak could not have felt more relieved. She let the Shadow Fae have the two beds in the cottage, while she, Naem, and Marek slept on the floor. But even on that hard surface, it took only seconds after Jak closed her eyes before she was asleep.



THE NEXT DAY, she awoke with a start, though she quickly realized that nothing was wrong. Some of the Bright Fae were walking about, collecting food from the farmland around them. They had decided some time ago that they would avoid unnecessary fires, in case it attracted unwanted trouble, so all the food they ate needed to be fresh.

She groaned, sat up, and stretched. Her muscles screamed from the effort she had put them through the day before. But her mind was alert, and she felt well rested. Hopefully her mother and Vander felt the same. Rising from her bed, she checked on the Shadow Fae sleeping in the other rooms. They were still asleep, but peaceful. Jak breathed a sigh of relief.

Marek was also still on the floor, but she didn't see Naem anywhere. Perhaps he had gone outside to help the Bright Fae bring in food, or stand on the lookout.

Moving past a few of the Bright Fae, she went out the back door of the cottage. Sure enough, Naem was leaning up against the side of the



house.

"Hey you!" he said as she exited the house. "Sleep well?" He was in a cheery mood.

"Yeah," Jak said. "You?"

"Better than ever, thanks to this," he raised his sleeve to point at the Healing brand. "I didn't realize how nice it is to have this brand. It keeps any aches or pains from disturbing me in the night, and helps my muscles relax. I slept like a baby! Who needs Sleeplessness when you can have Healing."

Jak grinned. "With Sleeplessness you only need an hour or two each week. Some people would call that a fair trade-off."

Naem shrugged, "I'm not complaining, maybe you can give me that one later?" he winked at her.

She chuckled and ran a hand through her hair. It was only then that she realized how messy and tangled it was from the night before and sleeping on the floor. And now that she thought about it, she could really use a bath.

When she looked up again, Naem had stepped closer. "You were amazing yesterday. All that trouble and you never blinked, even when so much could have gone wrong."

Jak shrugged. "It wouldn't have done any good to worry."

"Yes, but I'm not sure you realize how many people would have broken down and panicked. You kept your cool."

He was even closer now. Jak found herself torn between wanting to back up against the wall, or shorten the distance between them. The end result was she stayed where she stood.

Naem spoke again. "And listen, I don't know how or when we're going to get out of this...predicament." He waved his hand in the direction where the demon army stood some miles away. "But I...am glad to be facing it with you."

Jak found her words, "I'm glad you're here too. I'm not sure I could do this alone. I mean, even with what happened to give you your new brands, and my connection to the Fae, I'm not sure I would ever really be able to..."

Naem kissed her.

His lips were soft and warm, exactly as she had imagined. He put a hand on her face, which when she didn't pull away, reached behind her neck and pulled her in closer. She didn't resist. She needed him. All thoughts of her conflicting feelings for Marek, or the stress of the demon army faded from her mind. At that moment, all was right with the world.

Naem broke away and Jak reluctantly let him.

"I...uh." He scratched his head. "I'm sorry if that was..."

"It's okay," Jak said. She didn't know what else to say. Part of her

wanted to keep kissing Naem, to let him hold her and forget about everything. But she also felt her commitment to her mother, the other Fae, and the people of Foothold. They couldn't stand around while there was work to be done. But biting her lip and smiling, she said, "We can continue this later."

He smiled back and nodded. "I just...I wanted you to know."

She understood. Who knew if the two of them would even survive the next few days. But she knew one thing, she was going to do everything she could to make sure they did.

"Jak, Jak!" Marek came bursting through the back door. He paused only a moment at seeing Jak and Naem so close together. To Jak's embarrassment, he frowned looking at the two of them. But something else took priority. "Jak, they're coming. Kuldain and the Watchers. They're on their way here."

Jak knew it was only a matter of time before this happened. But she hadn't expected it so soon. They had only left the fortress a handful of hours ago. Her mother and Vander were still recovering. They had nothing to fight with. They couldn't run. That left only one thing to do.

Jak passed inside the house and out the front door, to where the small band of Watchers were just pulling into the clearing surrounding the farm. Kuldain and Skellig towered over the rest on their horses, and Jak saw the look on Kuldain's face. Triumph.

"Well, well, if it isn't that pesky thorn in my side. I believe you took something from me."

"Someone," she emphasized the last syllable. "They were never yours."

"Come, child," he said in mock sympathy. "We know you've been through a lot, your mind is confused."

Looking closer, Jak noticed that Kuldain did not look well. His face was pale, he had multiple cuts and bruises on his face. But none of that matched his expression. He was gleeful. He thought he had won. And perhaps he had, but not if Jak had anything to say about it.

Skellig sat on her horse beside Kuldain. Her eyes found Jak's and she could see the questions there. There might be hope for Skellig.

"The Fae are not our enemy," Jak said. "They helped us, they saved Naem."

Kuldain scoffed. "You'd say anything, girl. Many of the good men and women of this company died at the hands of the Fae."

"I wasn't talking to you," Jak said. Her eyes had not left Skellig's. The Major was frowning, taking it in. "You, all of you, know that the Fae only attacked because your precious Colonel provoked them. They were willing to make a peaceful alliance with you, and you treated them worse than demons."

A few of the Watchers hung their heads, though not all of them, Jak realized. Some looked angry, others confused.

Kuldain smirked. "Your naivete is adorable, young one, but you have been a thorn in my side for long enough, and you have clearly associated yourself with that which is forbidden. I therefore sentence you to death here and now." He waved a hand to the soldiers behind him. "Kill her."

"Wait." The voice was Skellig's. The Major had not raised her voice, but the command rang throughout the clearing. Kuldain looked at her, fire in his eyes.

"Excuse me?"

"Can I talk to you in private?"

"Whatever you have to say can be said in front of the band."

"Very well," Skellig cleared her throat. "You have forgotten our oath."

"Pray, enlighten me."

"We do not kill humans. We kill only demons."

Kuldain rolled his eyes. "She is hardly just another human. She supports demons and she's a Gifter. She's probably making demons on the side, picking off unwilling humans and using them in her experiments."

Skellig laughed. It was not the response Kuldain was expecting. His face flushed.

"Seriously, that girl, a demon maker? Look at the child, Kuldain, she only barely received her brand. She couldn't possibly know how to use it yet."

Jak felt a flicker of pride knowing that she had indeed figured it out...though not perfectly of course. But she wasn't going to tell anyone that.

Kuldain was shaking now. "I don't have time for this. Obey my orders or I will have you court martialed, removed from our ranks, and imprisoned in Foothold until I can find something to do with you!" he nearly spat the words.

"What's the matter, Kuldain?" Jak said, pushing her advantage. "You don't look so well. Are you sure you're feeling yourself?"

Kuldain stared at her, his eyes suddenly colder. She met those eyes, stare for stare. She knew, and he knew that she knew. Without another word, Kuldain leapt off his horse and reached for his sword.

A lot of things happened at once. Skellig pulled her sword and held it to Kuldain's neck faster than he could blink. The sound of weapons being unsheathed filled the area as other Watchers, some in support of Kuldain, others in support of Skellig, readied themselves for a fight. Naem and Marek, who had waited inside on Jak's request, came running out of the door, brandishing some of the farm tools as

weapons. They didn't look all that impressive, but they were followed by all twelve of the Bright Fae, their faces shining with an almost regal splendor. Many of the Watchers dropped their weapons at the sight of the Bright Fae, jaws slack and arms limp. Kuldain's face was a mask of fury. Skellig, on the other hand, remained admirably calm.

"You don't want to do this," said Kuldain to Skellig.

"I don't," she agreed. "But you have forced my hand."

"You really think these good people will fight for you?" Kuldain waved an arm at the other Watchers, but stopped as he saw them slowly dividing. With their weapons out, each Watcher was taking a side behind Kuldain or Skellig, watching the others warily. Jak got her first glimpse of Estel, who was frowning in confusion, but eventually moved towards Kuldain's side. Typical. And Skellig was her brand master too!

"I'll take my chances," said Skellig. "Right now we have bigger things to worry about than a small girl and the Fae. I don't know what they are, but my experience and instinct tell me that they are no more a threat than any human." More soldiers began inching to her side. Clearly, she had the larger majority of supporters.

"Colonel Kuldain, as your second I am declaring you unfit for duty. You will relinquish your weapon or someone will take it from you. I would have you imprisoned in Foothold but," she glanced at the soldiers backing up Kuldain. "I'm not sure we'll have that option."

"This is mutiny!" Kuldain cried.

"History will decide," said Skellig.

Kuldain took a step backward, away from Skellig's sword, and away from Jak. His eyes scanned the Watchers on Skellig's side, as well as Jak and the Fae. Jak saw the decision in those dark eyes. He knew he was outnumbered.

With one smooth motion, he grabbed the reins of his horse and began leading it away.

"Kuldain, I told you to relinquish your weapon." Skellig ordered. It was a symbolic gesture, as Kuldain could take a weapon from any of his followers, but the former Colonel turned to face her.

"I do not need something as petty and weak as a weapon to take you down." With that, he unstrapped his sword belt and let it fall to the ground. Then he and his followers marched away. It was a long time before anyone spoke. They all continued to watch Kuldain until he and his party had disappeared.

For a while, they all stood there. Some of the soldiers glanced at each other, and murmurs began moving through the small crowd. There were only a few dozen of them left. Skellig sheathed her sword and turned to face them. "It took great courage for you to do that, to turn against your Colonel who has led you through many battles. I

will not lie and say that I know everything about them,” she waved one arm at the Fae. “Or what we will do about the demon army waiting for us. But I promise you, that your lives, and the lives of the good people here in Foothold are my first priority. I cannot, I will not let you die if it’s the last thing I do. I will give my life first. And yes, I would do the same for these *people*.” She emphasized the last word as she pointed to the Fae.

One of the soldiers, a woman Jak had seen but didn’t know very well, stepped forward.

“Permission to speak, sir?”

“Granted.”

“I think I speak on behalf of everyone who remained here. We fight demons, sir, and these Fae are clearly not the same as the demons we have been trained to fight. If, in the future, we learn that these people are demons of another type, we will fight them. But for now, we will fight with them, and with you. Sir!” She saluted. The rest of the Watchers followed suit. Jak couldn’t believe how happy she was in that moment. There were still good people among the Watchers.

Major Skellig returned the salute with a smile. “I am proud of each of you. But now is a time for action. I want Jax and Petir to scout the demon army, and to report back to Foothold the moment they begin showing any different behavior.”

Two of the soldiers saluted and left the band.

“The rest of you, stand guard here until everyone is ready to go to Foothold. I am riding there myself before Kuldain can get there, to inform the garrison what happened here. Hopefully they will believe us over Kuldain, if he even bothers to show. I’m leaving Naem in charge. Return to Foothold as soon as you’re able.”

Naem perked up at that. But before he could thank the Major, she turned her horse and galloped away towards Foothold.

“My daughter,” a voice came from behind Jak. She turned to see her mother standing beside the other Fae. She must have been watching behind the Bright Fae. Now she stepped nearer.

“Mother,” Jak went to wrap her arms around her. As she did, she noticed Vander standing behind Karlona. “I’m so glad you’re awake and well. Did you see what happened? Kuldain left and Skellig is going to let us into Foothold!”

“We thank you,” Karlona said, “But we will not be going with you.”

Jak wasn’t sure she heard her mother correctly, “I’m sorry?”

“We will be of no help to you here.” Vander said from behind Karlona. “And we have had our fill of humans.”

What were they saying? They were human! Or at least they once had been. Why would they leave?

Karlona saw the confusion on Jak's face and tried to reach out and embrace her. But Jak moved just out of reach, her confusion turning to hurt.

"You're just going to let us fight these demons alone? You're going to let *me* fight them alone? Your daughter?"

"We are only two, we wouldn't be of much use. And if we die, the others of our kind will have no warning of what happened here. They must be warned or they might be next."

"I've seen you fight, you're worth a hundred demons. They only outnumber us twenty to one, which might be enough to wipe out an army in the open, but we'll be in Foothold. We'll have a chance there!"

"I'm sorry. We cannot stay." Both Shadow Fae began to retreat back into the house.

"Mother?"

Karlona stopped in her tracks, silver tears falling from her dark face. "I'm sorry."

Jak barely noticed anything else going on around her. She all but ignored Naem as he filled the other Watchers in, and introduced them to the Bright Fae. She shrugged him off as he tried to include her in the story. She only watched as her mother and Vander packed some small belongings and left the cottage. Before they had gone far, they vanished from her sight, their powers making them all but impossible to see.

It wasn't long before Naem mobilized the Watchers and the Bright

Fae. They collected all they could from the cottage before leaving. Who knew what they would need once in Foothold. Jak was still shaken from seeing her mother leave. She hadn't expected it, especially after putting her neck on the line to save her mother. She couldn't understand why she wouldn't help save the rest of the humans in Foothold in return. But despite her emotions, Jak marched with the rest of the band to Foothold when it was time.

When they arrived at the fortress, Naem and Jak stepped forward to request the portcullis be raised and the entrance lowered. Major Skellig was nowhere to be seen, but neither was Kuldain or his followers. Skellig must have arrived first, for it didn't take long before someone raised the portcullis, lowered the bridge, and let them in.

Inside, Jak and Naem were greeted by Major Skellig and the commander of the Watchers at Foothold, a portly, balding man named Bennet. Skellig introduced Jak and Naem, though she skipped over Marek who was also standing with them.

"I want the two of you, and any leaders of the Fae to accompany us to the tower," said Skellig. "We have a good deal of planning to do."

Captain Bennet kept eyeing the Fae nervously, but Skellig had obviously informed him and the others that they were not a threat. Though that didn't stop several of the soldiers from fingering their weapons. Jak eyed them carefully, but they seemed to be in control of themselves. Yewin led the Bright Fae as they proceeded to the tower and then accompanied Jak, Naem, and the others as they entered a small room on the first floor. It was the same room they had seen the night before, the one Kuldain and Skellig had run from when they realized that someone had broken into the fortress.

A large table stood in the center of the room and several chairs surrounded it. A large map of Foothold lay on the table.

Jak thought she saw Marek outside, having not been invited in, glancing at her but eventually leaving. That was too bad. He was

always much better suited for this sort of thing than she was. Back when they had played games as children, he had always been the one to plan and strategize. She just followed along. Should she invite him? Maybe if she asked Skellig.

But right then, Major Skellig began to speak. "Okay Captain, let's begin."

Captain Bennet nodded, "Our immediate problem is an army of demons a few miles out from us, holding steady. They number approximately four-thousand. We thought they were somehow under the command of these...ah...what do you call yourselves?" he said to Yewin.

"Bright Fae will do. To distinguish us from the Shadow Fae you held captive here."

"Ah yes," the Captain looked embarrassed. "And where are these Shadow Fae now?"

Jak answered, "They...won't be coming back."

Captain Bennet nodded, "Understandable given the way Kuldain treated them here. I wasn't surprised to learn that Major Skellig had relieved him of command, though I'm sure High Command will want a full investiga..."

"Let's get back to the point, Captain," Skellig said through thin lips.

"Ah, yes of course," Bennet said. "Well, as I said, we thought these demons were controlled by the Bright Fae, but it would seem we were incorrect in that assumption. So we now have no idea why the demons are simply waiting."

"Why they're waiting is irrelevant," Skellig said. "We must assume that they will attack at any moment, and we need to be prepared. So, what are our assets?"

"Well, I have a hundred men under my command," the Captain said. "How many did you bring back?"

"Just under fifty," Skellig said.

Jak frowned. That was far less than she thought was stationed here. She had expected at least fifty more.

"So that's one hundred and fifty against four thousand demons." Bennet tapped one finger on the table. "I don't like those odds."

"It will not be easy," Naem spoke for the first time. "But one Watcher is easily worth ten demons. With this fortress, we could be worth twenty or more. We still have a chance."

Skellig was nodding, "I agree. With enough archers and some boiling oil, we'll be able to take out most of the demons before they even manage to climb the wall."

"Ah...climb?" Bennet asked.

"Yes, Captain, demons are capable of climbing stone. They dig



their claws into the wall until their fingers bleed, but they don't stop. Demons never stop until they are dead."

"Except something is stopping them right now." Jak spoke for the first time. All heads turned to stare at her. "I mean, they're out there now. They're not moving. Something is stopping them. Something is guiding them."

"You mean to say that you think these demons are somehow being led."

"Yes," Jak said. "You said it yourself that you thought the Fae were leading them."

"But if it's not the Fae, than who?"

"I think I might have an idea," Jak said.

Then she told them of her encounter with the large demon down in the wine cellar. It had been more intelligent, more ruthless than the other demons she had fought. She told them how she had escaped and caused the roof to collapse in on itself.

"That was you!" Bennet said, suddenly angry. "We lost three men in that collapse. Kuldain was the only survivor."

"Actually, they died before the cave in. The demon I told you about, it killed them. I didn't see Kuldain anywhere before I brought down the ceiling."

The Captain stroked his chin. "So what are you saying?"

Jak took a deep breath. This was going to be harder to sell. "I used to think that Kuldain was just a bitter and angry human being. But now I think there might be more to it. I think Kuldain is somehow connected to this demon. I don't know how. Perhaps he became the demon, perhaps he summoned it. I never got a good look."

Bennet turned to Skellig, "And you're saying you trust this girl? Those are some serious accusations she's levelling at the Colonel."

"I don't know about being a demon, but he definitely is unfit for command. He tried to kill some of his own men, and this girl too. Not to mention the Fae. It's one thing to hate the Fae, but it's another thing entirely to attack them without provocation."

Bennet rubbed his balding head. "I don't know, Major, there are just too many variables here. We don't know enough to have an effective strategy."

"I agree," said Skellig. "But those demons wouldn't be there if they weren't going to attack eventually. We have to assume the worst if we want to be prepared."

"So what do you propose?"

Skellig then began a series of strategies. None of them were particularly ground-breaking, but Jak listened in carefully. She had never really listened to a true strategist suggest a plan for battle. She almost jumped when Skellig mentioned her name. What surprised her

more was what Skellig said next.

"I think she would make a good commander, given our limited resources. And since she probably understands the Fae better than anyone, they can be part of her ranks."

"Wait, what? I'm no commander!" Why would anyone want to put her in charge? Naem was looking at her with a half smile on his face. He obviously approved.

"You'll do fine, child."

"But what about Naem? Or, or Marek?"

"Naem will be commanding his own group, and as for your friend, he was recruited at the same time as you, correct? I see no reason why he's any more suited for this than you. Besides, you understand the Fae better than anyone else here. All you need to do is watch for our commands and make sure the Fae do their part."

"I'm curious to know what exactly that would entail," said Yewin. He had remained silent for most of the conversation, but leaned in now. His light cast shimmering shadows across the room.

"I actually have an idea about that," said Jak. Naem smiled further. Jak ignored him and continued to tell them her plan. It wasn't much of an idea, but Yewin liked it, and the others agreed it might give them an edge.

They spent the next few hours finalizing their plans. Even Jak got pulled into the conversation after her ideas were so readily accepted. Perhaps she did have something to offer these people, even without her mother or the rest of the Shadow Fae.

They eventually settled on a three-pronged defense plan, where Skellig, Bennet, and Naem would each take a quarter of the troops still left in Foothold. Jak would take the last quarter, including the Bright Fae, and aid where the fighting was worst.

Once they had finished, they each dispersed to begin spreading the plan to their respective squads. They needed to get the word out quickly to the entire fortress, just in case the demons attacked immediately.



BUT AFTER SEVERAL DAYS, the demons still did not attack. Perhaps that should have relieved Jak, but in fact it did the opposite. What could the demons possibly be waiting for? She suspected that Kuldain had something to do with the demons, but he was gone. With him out of the way, what point was there to wait? Were the demons simply playing with them?

Jak spent most of her days now pacing back and forth, when she

wasn't out training with Naem. He had begun training her again on their first day in Foothold. He trained the Bright Fae and as many of the villagers as wanted to participate too. When the demons attacked, and Jak was sure it would happen eventually, they needed as much help as they could get.

Most of the Bright Fae were enjoying their training, and the attention. As more soldiers and villagers got to know them, they began to open up and trust each other. It soon became apparent, to the Watchers especially, that the Bright Fae were no demons. They could barely hold a spear properly, despite Naem's best efforts. And while there were still plenty who distrusted the Fae, the overall change was positive, and it showed in the Bright Fae's temperament.

In addition to Naem's training, Skellig hosted regular drills, making sure that everyone knew their place once the demons started attacking. This kept all the soldiers on their toes, and gave Jak some much-needed time to rehearse her own part in the battle. Of course, part of her realized that the real battle would not follow a script as closely as they did, but it made everyone feel more secure about what they were doing. Even the villagers felt encouraged watching the military display. Jak caught a few of them waving or smiling as the soldiers fell into line along the walls.

Only Marek seemed to be in even worse spirits than before. He spent most of his time polishing weapons and making sure that all their equipment was ready for the impending attack. Mostly he kept to himself, though he spent a lot of time with the local blacksmith as they readied the weapons.

Jak felt bad for him, but honestly wasn't finding much time to spend with her old friend. When she wasn't training, she spent most of her free time with Naem. After that first kiss, they had taken to spending multiple nights staring at the stars and talking...and also kissing a bit more. Okay, maybe they kissed more than they talked, but Jak didn't care much at this point. She liked being around Naem. With her mother gone, he was the only person she really cared about now. And her experience giving Naem his extra brands had created an additional connection between them. And as the days rolled by, her worries began to fade. Perhaps they would be okay after all.

But Marek certainly didn't seem to think so. He kept hard at work each day, carefully avoiding Jak's gaze when she looked at him. He was clearly uncomfortable with her relationship with Naem. While she loved Marek like a brother, she had never really felt *that* way about him. Or...maybe she had at some point, but in a childish-crush kind of way. Had she misjudged him all this time?

On their fourth day inside the stronghold, she decided to ask him about it.

They were in the courtyard, Naem was training the Fae and a few others in the spear, when Jak saw Marek move across the courtyard into the armory, probably going to check and polish the inventory. She quickly left the square and trotted over to talk to him.

He saw her approach but looked back down at his work. He had a handful of old weapons laid across the table and he was doing his best to clean them with oil.

“Hey,” she said as she drew near.

“Hey,” he responded, but kept looking down at his work.

Jak thought about beating around the bush a bit more, but decided against it. They didn’t have time to dawdle. “Listen, I know you’ve been avoiding me, and I want to know why.”

Marek stopped what he was doing, but still didn’t look at her. “I’m not even sure I know, Jak. I...right now I wish I had never joined the Watchers, and never left Riverbrook. Have you ever thought about our home recently? There’s probably no one left. Maybe it’s overrun with demons or thieves. It’s just a ghost town. And you...you lost your parents, but I didn’t. I chose to leave them. I *chose* that! I’ve forgotten why. And now you and Naem...” he broke off.

Jak didn’t stir. So he had been thinking about her. “I see,” she said finally.

“Look, I don’t want things to be weird. You can make your own decisions, that’s fine. I just wish we could spend more time together. Like the old days.”

Jak hung her head. “I’m sorry. You’re right, I’ve been insensitive.”

“Oh, it hasn’t been just you,” Marek said, turning back to his work. “It’s everyone here. You’ve managed to make a name for yourself, and I’m not jealous, don’t get me wrong. But I do wish I could help out more. They’re barely even letting me fight.”

“What? But you’re one of the Watchers.”

“They don’t care. I have almost no combat experience, and I have little training as a Telekinetic. I can barely even activate it, much less trap a demon with it. I only managed to live past the battle with the Shadow Fae by pure luck. Even Skellig seems to think that I’m not worth anything.”

Jak opened her mouth to protest, but realized it probably wouldn’t do much good. Instead she watched Marek return to his work in silence for a time.

“You know,” she said finally. “I used to think I was useless. I still do sometimes. After the attack on Riverbrook, there’s nothing I wouldn’t have given to have a different brand. But this,” she held out her left hand, “this has become a part of me, and I’ve learned to use it.”

“I’ve wondered about that,” said Marek, looking up. “Isn’t that

how you got into Foothold to rescue your mother?"

Jak nodded, "I can't really get it to work right yet, but thankfully not working right makes a reasonable weapon. I can make things burn or explode. And I haven't even begun to think about what else I could do with it using the other brands, properly or otherwise."

Marek nodded, "So what's your point?"

"My point is, I'm not even using this brand to its full potential. I can't even get it to work properly. But I know I can and I will someday. Sometimes when we feel useless, perhaps we're short-changing ourselves. There's a lot we can do in the future, and a lot we can do now."

Marek rested both hands on the table to support himself and took a deep breath. "I know that. I'm not impatient for the future. I just...wish I had someone to enjoy the future with." He glanced at Jak, and she understood what she saw in his gaze. Relics, why did this have to happen now.

"I have something for you," said Marek after another pause. He stepped out of the room briefly and came back with two objects in his hands. One was long, thin, and wrapped in a woolen cloth. The second was...

"My journal!" Jak exclaimed as Marek handed it to her.

"I took these the day you disappeared," he handed the other object to her, which she realized must be her father's spear. "Kuldain didn't know I had them. I'm sorry I didn't get them to you sooner."

Jak just stared at the book in her hands, feeling a kinship that she would never have expected from an inanimate object. Looking back at Marek, she reached forward with her free arm and pulled him into a hug. "Thank you, Marek. I thought I was never going to see these again."

Marek laughed softly in her ear. "Um, it was nothing."

"I'm sure." She broke the embrace but kissed him on the cheek as she did so. "Thanks again," she said, and smiled. He smiled back.

"Hello Marek," came a voice from the doorway. "About time I saw you with a friend. Care to introduce me?"

It was the blacksmith. He was tall, with wavy blonde hair. To some of the older women, he would have been extremely attractive. His arms and chest bulged in his shirt from all his work, and his hair managed to stay a wavy golden blonde, untouched by soot. Even Jak found herself eying the man up and down.

"Ah...yes," said Marek. "Jak, this is Doran."

"A pleasure to meet you," Jak said, offering her hand. The blacksmith took it and shook. His grip was like a vice.

"Quite the pleasure, yes," he said. "I've heard all about you. The young girl who managed to break into the strongest stronghold in the

region and escape, then to come and lead all her friends back in again.” He laughed, but his eyes were cold. “Tell me, what is it about those creatures that you find so fascinating?”

“They’re not creatures, they’re people, and...I don’t know honestly.” She couldn’t tell just anyone that her mother was a Fae. That was a secret worth keeping a while longer.

“But surely they have given you some reason to trust them, some demonstration of their magic.” The man wanted something, Jak could tell. His eyes searched hers. “Perhaps they helped you find something within yourself.”

Jak took a step towards the door. Did the man somehow know about what happened when Yewin gifted her with light and truth? Did he know about Naem? That was a secret that not even Marek or Major Skellig knew. Naem had kept his brands covered, and the Bright Fae had remained silent.

“Ah...no,” she said finally. “I just don’t think we should make any false assumptions until we truly get to know someone. Excuse me, I have to go.” She was liking this blacksmith less and less with each second.

“Very well,” he said with a cheeriness that never touched his eyes. “Good luck out there once the demons start attacking. I’m sure it won’t be long. They can’t stay where they are forever!”

Jak was already part-way out of the door. There she stood in the courtyard, seeing Naem continue training the Fae and villagers. He was walking them through the basic forms. Jak smiled and remembered when she had been forced to literally walk for miles using those forms. What had she been worried about earlier? She thought she was upset about something but couldn’t remember what.

Forgetting about it, she went to join Naem, who smiled as she approached.

But no sooner had she reached Naem’s side when they both heard a commotion away towards the fortress entrance. Several men were shouting and lowering the bridge. Glancing at each other, Jak and Naem began running to the entrance.

The portcullis was open by the time they reached it and a woman on horseback was approaching. She was bent over and they could instantly tell that something was wrong.

Several other Watchers reached up to help the rider, who nearly fell from her horse. She was clutching her side and Jak could see red staining her uniform. It was Estel! What could have happened to her, and where were all the others that left with Kuldain? As Jak and Naem drew near, they could hear her saying something. Major Skellig also joined the party just as the injured Watcher-initiate began to speak.

“They’re coming,” she sputtered. “The demons...almost had us. The others...dead. They’re coming.”

**S**kellig began barking orders, soldiers scrambled to find their

weapons, Jak hurried to do the same. All was shouting and noise and bells tolling. All while a few select villagers dragged Estel away. They would need to question her eventually, Jak realized. To find out why she had left Kuldain. Though right now there was no time for that.

It was nothing like the simulations they had attempted. Those were expected, carefully planned, and unrushed. Now, with a real threat imminent, a new element was thrown in that changed everything: panic.

And yet, their simulations did serve for one thing. It allowed these soldiers, many of which had never seen battle, to react by instinct. Despite the shouting and the screaming, Jak could see many joining their ranks on the wall. Villagers were retreating into their homes or the barracks. Some would be down in the cellars with the doors bolted.

Jak reached her post, followed by the Bright Fae. They had not panicked, though most were fingering their weapons nervously. Most of them had been simple villagers, merchants, or scholars before their change. None of them were fighters. Yet, they were here, willing to help. And that was more than could be said for some.

As soon as she looked over the wall, she could see them coming over the hill. Demons, hundreds of them, running faster than any man could move unaided. No wonder Estel had barely made it in time. A horse would have to break a full gallop to outrun these demons. More of her soldiers joined them, the archers. They quickly advanced to the front.

Her small band was on the north side of the stronghold, facing the demons as they approached. Skellig's band was with her, while Naem took the east side by the entrance, and Bennet took the west side. From the look of things, they were going to need every side covered.

A strange silence settled over the Watchers as the demons approached. Jak could hear their army growing louder.

"Archers!" Skellig bellowed. "Ready!"



The archers did as commanded, notching their arrows. And they waited still.

Now, the demons were in range. Jak could see them individually, make out their gray skin.

“Volley!” Skellig yelled and the archers obeyed. Arrows shot through the air, landing straight in the enemy ranks. Demons fell, but other demons simply leapt over their fallen comrades like they weren’t there.

“Again. Volley!” More arrows shot from the battlements, and more demons fell. But it was like trying to stop a river. While a few dozen demons fell, dozens more took their place. Soon, they were approaching the wall.

That was Jak’s cue. She raised a golden flag that had been given her. Those in Naem and Bennet’s squads would know what it meant. It was time to execute Jak’s idea.

“Bright Fae, move forward!” she shouted. They did so, and the archers retreated to give them space. All twelve of the Bright Fae stood on top of the battlements, facing out at the army of demons, the first of which had reached the wall and were leaping and clawing at the stone.

“Ready!” Jak yelled. And she brought the flag down. Everyone in the army, including herself, shielded their eyes as they had practiced.

Even with her eyes shut, Jak could make out the blinding flash of light that emanated from the Bright Fae. Their light shone like a beacon from the battlement, brighter than anyone could look at without being temporarily blinded.

The demons staggered. Those that had climbed part of the wall fell into the moat. All of them tried to shield their eyes, witless though they were. Most collapsed where they stood, clutching at their faces.

“Now, now!” Skellig yelled. The archers returned and began firing arrow after arrow at the demons. Blinded as they were, the monsters were easy targets. The archers continued firing until they had no more arrows left in their quivers. One by one, they retreated back to where villager volunteers held reserves. Then they returned to continue firing.

It had worked. The demons were temporarily held back, and now a great many of them were falling. They might actually survive this.

But her dreams were short lived. By now, the demons could see again, and they were fast approaching, leaping over the bodies of their demon comrades. More of them began jumping at the wall, digging their unnatural claws into any crack or crevice available.

Jak raised her banner high again and the Bright Fae moved forward for another turn. When she was sure they were ready, Jak brought the banner down once again. Everyone shielded their eyes as

the Bright Fae grew ever brighter, once again blinding the demons below. Good. It was working. Now she just needed to signal Skellig to drop the oil. Jak raised her hands and flashed the signal: opening her hands twice then dropping them.

But by now, most of the army was at their doorstep. Demons that had flanked them on either side managed to avoid the worst of the Fae's blinding light. They were now attacking Naem and Bennet's sides of the wall, and they were coming fast.

Hundreds of demons barreled over each other in an attempt to get at the fortress.

Finally, Jak heard Skellig answer her signal. "Oil!" Skellig shouted. They had reached the next stage. Some of the villagers that had volunteered to fight brought forward large cauldrons of oil that had been burning constantly for the last few days. On Skellig's command, they were tipped over the edge of the wall. Screams echoed below them. Chillingly human-sounding screams.

And yet they kept coming. Jak looked from one side to the other to see that Naem and Bennet were also using oil. But just as one of Naem's cauldrons tipped over the edge, a demon crested the side of the wall next to it. With the north side still handling things, it would seem that Jak was needed elsewhere.

Jak shouted an order to the Bright Fae, and they began running through the commotion to the east side of the wall, where Naem and his army began holding off the enemy as demons vaulted over the wall one by one.

Jak got her spear ready, as did the Fae and the few others that were with her. It was time to start fighting face to face.

One demon leaped at them as they approached. Instinctively, Jak fell into one of the stances that Naem had taught her, and the demon impaled itself on the end of her spear. Without stopping, she wrenched the spear out of the demon in one fluid motion, readying it for another attack. More demons were coming. They needed to get to the wall. She needed the Bright Fae to do their thing and force a momentary retreat among the demons.

But more of the human-shaped monsters were flying over the wall and joining the fight. Many of Naem's men were struggling. Jak saw a few fall under the weight of several demons.

Another demon leaped at them, and Yewin moved forward to counter. He missed, and the demon moved in for the kill. But at that moment, Yewin caught the creature's face in one hand and light poured from his palm. The demon screamed, its eyes glowing. The multiple brands that made the demons what they were also began to glow. They glowed ever brighter as the demon's screaming increased. Then the demon dropped, all sound gone from its mouth, and the light

from its eyes and brands fading.

“What was that?” she managed to ask Yewin.

The Fae was looking at his hands. “I don’t know.” The other Fae were looking at their hands too, as if trying to figure out what Yewin had done.

“Well keep that up. We’re going to need it.” Jak turned back to the battle ahead of her. Naem was right in the middle, killing demons like he was born to it. But there were many of them now. Telekinetics and Flamedancers were still holding their own, but even they couldn’t focus on too many demons at once. One by one, they fell.

Jak fought her way to where Naem danced, his spear never ceasing to move. He saw her approach and smiled. He actually smiled!

But they didn’t have time to talk. Hundreds more demons were on their way, and they were losing precious soldiers. But that didn’t stop Jak and Naem. Together, they began taking out one after another. They stood with their backs against each other. Jak had nowhere near the same fighting prowess that Naem displayed, but she held her own. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see some of the Bright Fae replicating the same technique that Yewin used to kill one demon. Together, they were holding the line on the east side.

It was short lived. Even fighting as efficiently as they were, there was little hope to hold the line indefinitely. Others were falling, and she realized with horror, that several of the Bright Fae were lying on the ground as well, their light fading to nothing.

No! She couldn’t let them die. They were the only ones left!

A demon lunged at her, and she couldn’t sidestep in time to counter the beast’s momentum. It knocked her backwards into Naem, who had to adjust his footing to stay upright. The demon was gnashing its teeth at Jak, its large fangs protruding unnaturally from its all-too-human face. She only just held it back with the length of her spear. Naem was too busy fighting his own demons to even notice that she was in trouble.

Suddenly, Marek was there. The demon howled as Jak’s childhood friend speared it in the side. Marek screamed and jabbed the spear in deeper. But the demon wasn’t dead yet. It twisted and the spear went with it, torn from Marek’s hands. Stumbling, the demon leapt at Marek. It was too weak from its wounds to do much, but Marek stepped back against the wall. Another demon rose from behind, having just scaled the wall. Instinctively it attacked Marek.

“Marek!” Jak screamed. Her friend screamed as this new demon bit into his neck. Marek spun and grabbed a dagger from his belt, somehow managing to plunge it into the demon’s chest. But the beast still held on to Marek, who was dazed and unbalanced from the attack. With the weight of the demon pulling on Marek’s armor, Jak

watched in horror as her friend tumbled over the wall and into the hoard of demons below. No. Not Marek. Please not Marek!

Somehow Jak managed not to be attacked as she ran to the wall, screaming. Marek hit the ground, but he was instantly hidden from view as demons swarmed his body.

“MAREK!” she screamed harder. This couldn’t happen. Not another one. Not him.

Demons came at her, but she killed them faster than she ever had before. She would kill every demon that dared cross this wall. But there were too many. They only had one option available now.

“Retreat!” Naem yelled, coming to the same conclusion. “Get back to the courtyard.”

He didn’t have to say it twice. All of the remaining soldiers in their squad, only a few of them were still alive, began rushing to the steps. Demons followed, and Naem did his best to hold them off. Jak was still fighting, barely hearing the order to retreat. She felt a hand grab her shoulders, pulling her back. No, she had to keep fighting, she had to...she looked up and saw Yewin trying to drag her away. That was when she remembered the Fae and all they had the potential to lose. She had lost a friend, they were on the verge of losing all of their kind.

She turned and joined the Bright Fae as they retreated. They hurried down the steps, killing as they went, and following Naem not far ahead of them.

Then they ran for all they were worth to the center of Foothold, the courtyard outside of the tower. There, they would enter the tower and keep the demons back. At the top of the tower were many of the children that still lived in Foothold. The entrance to the tower was narrow, and could be held by a handful of soldiers. But now, seeing how easily the demons had climbed the wall, Jak was beginning to wonder if they had made the worst mistake in putting the children at the top. They would just have to keep the demons from even reaching the structure.

As they dashed into the courtyard, Jak could see Skellig’s troops, and some of Bennet’s too, joining them at the fall-back point. They were closely followed by demons running on all fours. Jak thought she heard Skellig shouting something about getting the Flamedancers in a circle, but she was having trouble listening at this point. Why did Marek have to die?

The remaining Watchers grouped together outside the tower, forming a half circle. There were so few...

Jak joined Naem and they braced themselves as a mass of demons came their way. The wall was completely abandoned now, and more monsters crawled over the battlements. Jak heard screams as the

demons discovered some of the villagers in homes throughout Foothold. But most of the demons were focused on the remaining Watchers, bunched together at the heart of the stronghold. This was where it would end. Jak placed her spear into a readying stance, its tip dripping with black blood.

The demons...stopped.

They stopped moving completely in unison. Jak and the rest of the survivors didn't even attack, they were so shocked. Then as one, the demons turned to the east. It was spooky how they all moved exactly as before.

Then they darted forward together, running to the east wall, leaving the rest of the Watchers completely abandoned in the courtyard. A few of the soldiers lowered their spears, staring in bewilderment at their comrades. Jak didn't blame them.

What was going on?

Then a cry pierced the air. It sounded much like the cry of an eagle, but lower and more guttural. The few demons that remained nearby recoiled at the sound, then joined the other monsters in rushing towards the east side.

Jak did what no normal human would do, and ran to follow the demons. She had to know what was going on.

She reached the wall in no time, and scampered up the side staircase to reach the top. Demons were clamoring over the wall, completely ignoring the fact that she was there.

When she reached the top, she put one hand to her forehead. A smile slowly spread on her face, and within moments she was cheering.

Coming down the east slope of the mountain was a horde of dark shapes, very dark shapes. They advanced towards the oncoming demons who were charging in their direction.

And then they began to die.

It was the Shadow Fae. They had come. Karlona had somehow convinced them to come!

Jak could only watch in awe as the demons fell in waves, first from poison darts, and then from the Fae's knives. The Watchers had already driven down the ranks of the demons, now the Shadow Fae were wiping out the rest.

Cheering again, Jak ran to the pulleys that kept the bridge from lowering. A hand rested on hers as she began to open a path inside. It was Naem. He had a huge grin on his face, and they began lowering the bridge together. Demons poured in, but not on the offensive this time. This time, they were running. Watcher spears awaited them inside, Fae daggers outside.

It didn't take long before every last demon lay dead at their feet.

Jak stood at the edge of the bridge, looking for her mother as

Shadow Fae joined the survivors inside the stronghold. She jumped ahead of the crowds, searching. Then, she found her.

The unmistakable form of her mother came running across the bridge, sidestepping and jumping across the dead bodies of demons. A moment later and they were embracing and crying and laughing all at once. Her mother had come for her. She had saved her. She had saved everyone. Soldiers and Shadow Fae were cheering and shaking hands in fellowship around them. It was the most beautiful sight Jak had ever seen.

“You came!” she said as she embraced her mother.

Karlona broke the embrace to look at her daughter. “I knew that we wouldn’t be of much help alone, but if we could somehow convince the others to come.”

“I can’t believe you managed to bring them, after what happened to you and Vander.”

“Actually, it was Vander who convinced most of them. He spoke for a long time about you and how there were good people that needed our help. I never would have thought he’d say something like that. But that was what convinced the others. I think word of the Bright Fae also helped persuade them though. We had heard that there may someday be other variety of Fae, but we never actually encountered one until now.”

“I’m sure they are as glad to see you as we are.” Jak’s face fell, remembering. “Those that are left, that is. There were only twelve, and now there are even fewer.”

Karlona put a hand on her shoulder. “I’m sure they will make it out of this eventually. We started out few in number, but as you can see, our numbers grew.”

Jak smiled and together, she and her mother walked inside the fortress. They would need to start a massive bonfire for the bodies of the demons, then count their losses. Jak didn’t want to think too hard on that front. Any loss was too much. Any loss...

Marek swam into her vision and it seemed in a moment she remembered every experience she had ever had with him. Every prank, every laugh, every moment of comfort. He had been there for her several times since her father died. From walking with her while she practiced her footwork, to when he helped her and Naem escape Kuldain. Why hadn't she done more to thank him?

Naem joined them as they walked, thanking Karlona for their help. At least Naem was still alive.

But they hardly made it to the courtyard, when shouts echoed behind them. They turned to see two Shadow Fae carrying a limp form between them. They were calling for Karlona.

As they approached, Jak recognized the man in the middle, and her heart turned to stone.

It was Kuldain. The Colonel was bruised and battered, but he was still alive. As they approached, his head lifted to gaze at Jak's face. He didn't look at Karlona or Naem, or anyone else for that matter. His eyes never left hers.

"Don't let him touch your skin," she said instinctively. "He's a Blood-burner." *And perhaps something worse*, she thought.

The two Fae nodded, though they probably already knew this. They only touched armored portions of Kuldain's body and held his arms so that his exposed hands could not move to touch anyone.

"Where did you find him?" Karlona asked.

"He came to us," one of the Fae responded. "We didn't see from where."

"Where are the others?" Naem asked. "He had a dozen or so Watchers with him when we last saw him."

Kuldain grinned. Jak did not like what she saw there. "What did you do to them?" she asked him directly.

"They were of no use to me," he said through a parched throat. "Once we left you, I killed them all."

Jak felt her spine stiffen. All of them? They had all chosen to follow Kuldain instead of Skellig and herself, but she would never have wished this fate on them.

"Why?" said Naem, his face full of shock. "What did they ever do to you?"

Kuldain glanced at Naem as though just noticing he was there. "It is not something you would understand, boy."

"So why are you here now?" Naem asked. "You must know that we have you completely outnumbered. You can't do anything to hurt us now."

"He's here for me." Jak could see it in his eyes, which barely left hers for the entire conversation.

Kuldain smiled slowly. "You really are a clever girl." His voice had

lost its raspy tone. He was speaking now as he always had, with a deep commanding voice. The change caused the Shadow Fae holding him to tense. And they weren't the only ones. Karlona had her knives out, and Naem was poised for an attack.

"All of this," Kuldain gestured with his eyes to all the dead demons and soldiers around them. "That was all to get to you. The demons that dragged you into the mountains. I made them do that. They were to take you to someone very interested in meeting you. It was a happy coincidence that you led me to the Fae. All of this, is about you." Kuldain was beginning to stand straight now, despite the efforts of his captors to keep him down.

"Who?" Jak asked. It was all she could say. *He fears you.*

"He spoke with you once, on the day your father died."

A chill went down her spine. The mysterious force that had held her in place, that had asked her if she was the one. Who was this mysterious person who clearly held so much power?

"What does he want?"

"That is not for you to know. But he's changed his mind about how to handle you, and I am here to make sure you never interfere with him again."

And with that, he hurled the two Shadow Fae off his arms with incredible strength. They each went flying into the bodies of other Fae and soldiers who gathered to watch.

Kuldain laughed, a slow, deep laugh, and it turned ever deeper as his eyes flashed red.

Then he began to change.

His Blood-burner brand glowed a brilliant white, but Jak soon noticed that there were other lines glowing too, brands that she had never seen before, that had remained hidden somehow. Kuldain had multiple brands! The lines continued up Kuldain's arm, spreading to other parts of his body, made visible for the first time. And all the while he laughed. His body grew taller, his arms elongated, and his teeth morphed into long, pointed fangs. It was the demon Jak had seen in the wine cellar. Kuldain was a demon. But something much worse than the others.

He lunged at Jak. She barely managed to dodge, bringing her spear up to try and redirect Kuldain's motion. It worked, Kuldain went right past her, but Jak was nearly knocked off her feet. Watchers and Fae drew their weapons, but stepped back as Kuldain grabbed a few of them and burnt them to cinders before they had a chance to scream. Apparently even as a demon, he could still use Blood-burning.

He turned back to Jak and smiled, before lunging at her again. This time, she was better prepared. She spun in a way that left her spear in the direction of Kuldain's forward momentum. He managed



to throw himself to the side enough to avoid the brunt of the spear, but it still tore a small gash in Kuldain's side.

Naem joined the battle, temporarily distracting Kuldain from his pursuit of her. Jak also noticed multiple poison darts sticking out of Kuldain. None of them seemed to have any effect. Jak realized that the same thing had happened in the mountain, but she had thought that had something to do with being a Blood-burner. Perhaps it was Kuldain's other brands that spared him. Regardless, the poison would not work. They were going to have to do this the old-fashioned way.

She leapt at the monster who was Kuldain, brandishing her spear as she went. The demon, temporarily distracted by Naem, didn't notice Jak approach. Her spear found its mark, and Kuldain howled as the spear broke flesh.

Their temporary advantage was short lived however. Kuldain spun to one side, and the spear went with him. Jak lost control and her spear went flying. She was defenseless.

Karlona was helping now, and between her and Naem, they were keeping Kuldain busy. None of the others dared step in. All were watching transfixed at the battle before them.

The demon's massive jaws finally found flesh and they dug into Naem's arm. He screamed and fell backward. Before Kuldain could finish him off however, Karlona was leaping at him with two obsidian daggers in hand. They never found their mark. A swift backhand from Kuldain's massive arm and Karlona went flying. She never stood a chance when she fought Kuldain on the mountain top. She didn't stand a chance now.

Jak looked around her desperately, trying to find a weapon. All of the Watchers had retreated a safe distance, she could never run to grab one of their spears in time.

She had to find something! Kuldain was laughing at Karlona and Naem, moving in to kill them both.

Then she saw one of her mother's daggers, thrown to the ground as she had been knocked backward. Jak ran forward to pick it up. She had it!

Just before Kuldain could descend upon the two people in the world that she cared about, Jak leapt on his back, slashing downward with the dagger over and over again. Kuldain growled an unnatural sound and reached behind him. A sharp spin of his body sent her flying and she tumbled on the ground, not far from where Naem and her mother still lay. Naem was trying to get to his feet, but was staggering from the loss of blood in his arm.

A hand closed around Jak's throat, and she gasped as the unnatural strength of the demon raised her by the neck into the air.

"I never saw what danger you posed." Kuldain's voice was a low

growl. "Now I understand, how much of a nuisance you are. I'm going to enjoy this!"

And Jak felt it, the blinding pain as her blood began to heat. He was using his Blood-burning on her! It wasn't nearly as instantaneous as before. Perhaps he was savoring the moment, or perhaps he was weakened by his multiple wounds. But Jak could feel her blood pressure rising. Her head began to pound and she was starting to have trouble thinking clearly. The pain was too much!

Without thinking, she grasped the arm that held her neck with both hands, and used all her willpower to summon one truth. *I am not going to die here!* The Gifter brand on her left hand shone with white light. Jak instantly felt the heat of her blood diminish as Kuldain realized what she was doing.

"No!" he yelled and dropped her. But it was too late. Inscribed on his body was a new brand, a Flamedancer brand.

A faulty Flamedancer brand.

Kuldain screamed, a sound far more horrible than anything Jak had heard. It seemed to fill the whole stronghold, echoing off the walls and causing soldiers to cover their ears. The former Colonel turned demon doubled over in pain, the light from his brands flickering and dying as they conflicted with this new, unstable brand. Each brand fought for dominance, none of them won.

Then he burst into flame. The scream continued for seconds, perhaps minutes as he was consumed by the fire. Jak watched with the others as Kuldain's screams died, and then the fire began to die as well, leaving a charred corpse in its wake.

Kuldain was, at last, dead.

After the battle, Jak collapsed and only vaguely remembered hands carrying her to a soft bed. The Blood-burning, albeit mild compared to what that dark magic was capable of, still left her brain clouded and her body weak for days. She was only vaguely aware of the time that passed, though she woke from time to time, sweating and shaking. Nightmares plagued her dreams, and she never seemed to fully awake from them.

But eventually she did rest, the nightmares subsided and nothingness took her.

It was some time later when she fully awoke. The first thing she realized was that she was extremely hungry. The second thing was that she wasn't alone in the room.

Her mother sat at the foot of a large, cushioned bed. That bed was larger than any she had ever seen. It had two mattresses. Two! And it extended well beyond her feet. Her mother stood as soon as Jak opened her eyes to look around her.

"She's awake, she's awake!" her mother's voice wasn't too loud, exactly, but the noise still made Jak wince. Moments later, more noises entered the room as two of the Watchers brought in the most delightful sight Jak had ever seen.

Food!

Barely even aware of what she was doing, she started tearing into the delicious morsels in front of her. There was roast chicken, still warm and drenched in gravy. There were apples and yams and cheeses. There was bread and butter and even some sweet rolls. Jak washed it all down with some large vats of water provided for her.

She could see her mother there, watching and smiling. She needed to talk to her, but she didn't have time to think about that while she stuffed her face.

By now, she was fully awake and feeling much better.

"That looks like it helped," Karlona said. She was sitting at the foot of the bed again.

"Oh, it did. I don't think I've ever been so hungry. How long was I

asleep?"

"Three days. We were starting to worry."

Three days. Jak didn't even know someone could sleep for three days. The battle with the demons and Kuldain must have taken more out of her than she thought.

"What happened after I blacked out?" she asked.

Karlona proceeded to catch her up on everything that happened. The battle had been a hard one. The demons, all four thousand of them, had fallen, but the cost was high. All but some thirty of the Watchers were dead, including Bennet, the Captain of the local garrison. He had died early on the west side, falling when some of the first demons climbed over the wall. Major Skellig had survived, but with worse injuries than Jak, and she was still being cared for elsewhere. Many of the villagers were dead too, though the civilian casualties were far fewer than those of the Watchers. Apparently, most of the town saw that as a victory.

In better news, the Fae were getting along well with the locals. The assistance of the Bright Fae during the battle, and the Shadow Fae coming to rescue them had caused everyone to put aside their first impressions and welcome the Fae as their saviors. The remaining Watchers even awarded medals to Karlona, Yewin, and some of the other Fae leaders. It was a large step forward to bring the Fae into full fellowship with society.

Most of the Fae and the villagers had spent the last few days cleaning up after the battle. The demons were placed in a fire outside of Foothold and burned. The dead Watchers, villagers, and Fae were given a proper burial. That news caused Jak to remember what happened to her friends.

"Marek, did you find Marek?"

Karlona shook her head, "I don't know who that person is."

"Naem knows, is he here?"

As if on cue, Naem entered from outside the room. Had he been waiting out there?

"Hey!" he said. "You're looking better."

He had a bandage around his arm where Kuldain had bit him, but otherwise looked fine.

"Marek, do you know what happened to him?"

Naem hesitated but shook his head. "There are...actually a lot of people that are unaccounted for: the blacksmith, the cook, and several of the Watchers. Once they were attacked by the demons...well, it's not pretty."

"Marek fell into the moat. Have you looked there?"

"We did." Naem rubbed his neck. "I'm sorry. All we found were...pieces. The demons took care of the rest."

Jak nearly collapsed back in her bed. She had expected something like this, but part of her had held onto the hope that Marek got away in the chaos. Now it was official. Marek was not coming back.

Tears came to her eyes and she tried to wipe them away. But when her mother put one arm around her, she couldn't hold back any longer. She cried and cried in her mother's arms.



THE NEXT FEW days passed in a blur. She spent most of her time in bed, eating when the time came. But after a day or two she was feeling much stronger, and would take small walks around the stronghold. Soldiers and civilians would point and look at her, identifying her by the strange red streak of hair among black locks. Jak heard whispers of “Adam-blessed” or “Child of the Fae.” Apparently rumors of her relationship to the Fae was out, and spreading.

Jak tried once or twice to stop people from talking about her, but all that did was cause them to timidly apologize and bow or curtsy as if she were a noblewoman. After a few attempts, she stopped trying.

Naem visited her a few times, but she kept her distance. They hadn't had a close talk since before the battle, and when he tried to kiss her, she withdrew. With Marek dead, and knowing how he had felt about her, it just seemed...disrespectful. Or maybe she just didn't want to complicate her life further right now. She was dealing with enough.

Major Skellig, thankfully, was healing nicely. She woke a few days after Jak, and immediately sent for her, Naem, and the Fae leaders.

“We would have been lost had it not been for you and the Fae.” she told them from her bed, having just finished her own meal. “As long as I'm in charge, you will always have a place here at Foothold.” That last comment was reserved for Karlona and Yewin. Of course, none of them knew how long Skellig would remain in charge of the fortress. With Bennet dead, Watcher High Command would have to appoint someone new. Perhaps that would be Skellig, perhaps not. But the Fae appreciated the gesture nonetheless.

Major Skellig waved to an assistant who brought a small parcel wrapped in cloth. “I've reserved these for you two,” she said to Jak and Naem. “Both of you have undergone hardships that most fully-grown soldiers will never have to endure. You've lost ones you've loved, been disfellowshipped by your fellow Watchers, suffered mortal wounds and lived, and led others into battle against an army of demons. You suffered valiantly, and it is my pleasure to award you

with the silver star, the highest honor I have the authority to bestow.”

She unwrapped the parcel and revealed two medals, both silver and fashioned in the shape of a five-pointed star, a symbol of courage and fortitude.

Jak and Naem took the medals in silence. It was a hard moment, thinking of all the valiant men and women that had died and therefore couldn't receive proper recognition for their work.

Skellig seemed to be thinking along the same lines, “I know this is a tough time for you. We've all lost people we cared about. But know that without you, the rest of us wouldn't be alive either. We owe you a debt.”

And with that, she saluted. Naem returned the salute on instinct. Jak did the same a moment later. Then Skellig's nurse shooed them out of her quarters to give the Major some air.

Outside, Jak fingered her medal. “I kind of forgot that I was actually one of the Watchers myself, albeit a Watcher in training,” she said to Naem. “After I met my mother, I kind of felt like I lost my affiliation with the band.”

“There will always be a place for you among the Watchers.” Naem replied, and Jak could hear the subtext, *there will always be a place for you with me.*

Naem excused himself, and Jak was about to leave for her room when Karlona strode up behind her and put a hand on her shoulder. “So what are you planning to do now, stay with the Watchers?”

Jak kept silence for a time, then answered, “No. The Watchers were never where I belonged. After father died, I thought joining the Watchers was the only way I could make a difference, I thought of the band as a way to make up for choosing a worthless brand. But now...I realize that being a Gifter could possibly be the most beneficial path I could take. I want to go to Skyecliff and train at the college.”

Karlona nodded, but hung her head. “I see.”

“You could come with me,” Jak encouraged her mother. “We could use this opportunity to spread the word about the Fae, to show people that you helped us here in Foothold.”

Karlona smiled but shook her head. “I'm sorry, child. I am needed here, among my people. It's not time yet to go to Skyecliff. It will take long enough to fully integrate into Foothold. The people here are more accepting, but change doesn't happen overnight.”

Jak looked away. Well, she had expected this. At least her mother was still alive. At least Jak had accomplished that much. “I'm going to miss you,” she said finally.

“And I you, Jak. We'll find a way to see each other. I want to be a greater part of your life now.”

Jak smiled, and her joy was genuine. She would go to Skyecliff

knowing that someone cared what happened to her there. That was enough.

“I won’t leave for a while,” she said. “We have a lot of catching up to do.”

Her mother returned Jak’s smile. “Sixteen years of catching up, yes.”

The two of them retreated to Jak’s room, where they sat and talked long into the night.

## Epilogue

The Gifter known as Gabriel walked the path that led from Tradehall to Foothold. Rumors were running wild about the unusual events that had transpired at the Watcher stronghold over the last few weeks. Merchants that he met on the road told of demon armies and magical Fae, though no one seemed to make up their mind on whether the latter had acted as friend or foe.

Among the rumors were tales of a girl with raven hair, streaked with red. Most of the stories agreed that the girl had led the Fae against the demons. Some said she led the demons against the Watchers, using her brand as a Gifter to turn all that opposed her into more demons to fill her ranks.

Gabriel seriously doubted that last rumor. It had been told to him by a shifty-eyed merchant that Gabriel wouldn't trust as far as he could throw the man. Everyone else he encountered seemed to agree that the girl was on their side.

Gabriel knew this girl, having given her the Gifter brand himself several months earlier. He had to leave in a hurry that night when the demons attacked Riverbrook, and was then saved by a band of Watchers under the command of someone from Gabriel's past, someone he would rather avoid.

For a while he had tailed the group of Riverbrook refugees, staying far enough back not to be seen. He had assumed that the girl went with the main group to Tradehall. But when he arrived and talked to some of the villagers that knew the girl, he realized that he had been wrong. Jak had gone to Foothold, and had quite the adventures from the sound of things.

And now he followed the rumors hoping to follow them to their source. He had made a promise to train Jak as a Gifter, and he would fulfill that promise if he could. But part of him knew that the girl would be a far more gifted apprentice than any he had taught. They were entering a new age, one where new races sprouted from the ground, and where magic found new ways to manifest itself. It was an age of change and chaos. And something told Gabriel that young Jak



was going to find herself right in the middle of it.

“Good day, traveler.” A voice spoke ahead of him. It was a tall man with blonde hair and well-defined muscles. He was walking towards Gabriel from the road ahead, coming from the direction of Foothold.

“Hello,” Gabriel responded.

“I don’t see too many people going that way, are you headed to Foothold?” the man asked.

“Yes, I have a student there.”

The man smiled. “I’m Doran,” he offered his hand with a smile. “I was the blacksmith in Foothold.”

“Oh, then perhaps you knew my student, a young girl by the name of Jak.”

Doran’s smile widened, but something about it made Gabriel uneasy all of a sudden. “Yes, I met the girl. She was quite remarkable.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“And what’s your relation to her?” the blacksmith asked.

Gabriel didn’t want to say any more than he had to, but suddenly his mouth opened as if on its own and words began pouring out.

“I gave her the brand she carries. I realized at first that she would be a smart student, but I had no idea she would make a name for herself like she had. I’m going to take her away to Skyecliff. I have high hopes that she could be my replacement some day.” His took a deep breath. What had compelled him to say all of that? He looked back at the blacksmith. “Who are you?”

“Be careful with that one, Gabriel. You may find she’s more trouble than she’s worth.”

The blacksmith took a few careful steps around Gabriel, who stood there, barely even aware that he had never told the man his name. Everything seemed suddenly...fuzzy.

But after a few moments of just standing there, he continued on his way, unsure of what had troubled him just moments earlier.



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## Author's Note

Thank you so very much for reading this book. As my first proper release, it means the world to me that you would take the time out of your day to spend it in my little universe.

The story of Jak is one that I've had in my head for a very long time, and it is one that ties into my larger universe in a very big way. You'll have to wait for some of the upcoming books to know why that is ;)

Over the years, the story has changed quite a bit. In fact, she was once a boy, a kind of Rand al'Thor from the Wheel of Time series. Boy am I glad I didn't stick with that idea. She works so perfectly as she is.

The story of Jak is the story of how someone goes from being nobody to becoming one of the greatest heroes that this fantasy world will ever see. I liked the idea of starting her off as a nearly useless character, but building her up until she began to show a lot more promise. And you will see more of that development in later books.

*Out of Shadow*, like all of my science fiction and fantasy books, is part of the Argoverse. Check out my other books for more stories set in this universe.

Until next time, thanks again for reading.

## About the Author

Jason Hamilton is an unapologetic nerd of all things science fiction and fantasy. He is the author of the *Roots of Creation* and *Alice: The Last Founder* series, and many other forthcoming novels.

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